

THE Christian CENTURY

Thinking Critically. Living Faithfully.

HARD CHOICES

Genetic testing and parenthood

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AMERICAN SOUNDINGS

“I’m fascinated by culture—the things people make and are made by, whether it’s music, television shows, sports, consumerism or technology.

“I try to look at these realities from the perspective of eucharistic worship, which centers all of life and creates its own culture.

“Beginning at that fertile eucharistic center, there’s no end to what Christians can learn, explore and enjoy.”



Rodney Clapp’s books include *Tortured Wonders: Christian Spirituality for People, Not Angels* and *Johnny Cash and the Great American Contradiction*.

Rodney Clapp writes American Soundings for the *Christian Century*.

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How to disagree

CIVILITY WAS the theme of an event sponsored by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Synod of the Rockies in mid-October. The theme was well timed in light of congressional gridlock, with legislators refusing to talk to one another, and also for a Protestant denomination that has been arguing for decades over issues of sexual practice and orientation, ordination, biblical authority and theology. The arguments have not always been civil.

When the church's General Assembly in 2011 removed a rule that prohibited the ordination of gays and lesbians, conservatives strongly dissented. More than a hundred congregations, including some of the largest in the denomination, have left. One congregation has sued its presbytery and obtained an injunction that prohibits presbytery officials from interfering in the life of the church. The topic of civility and remaining in relationship in spite of significant disagreement and conflict could not be more relevant.

Event planners invited Richard Mouw and me to make presentations. Mouw, who recently retired as president of Fuller Theological Seminary, is a distinguished scholar and popular spokesman for the evangelicals in the PCUSA. His positions on the defining issues are consistently conservative, but he is a loyal Presbyterian and consummately civil. He began his remarks with a review of John Calvin's writings on the topic of civility. Calvin, he observed, could be intolerant and harsh. His involvement in the execution of Michael Servetus is no secret. But Calvin also taught respect, tolerance and civility among Christians engaged in theological disputations.

I suggested that some incivility in the church reflects the rudeness and decline in civility in American culture. I also suggested that Christians owe one another more than basic civility because we operate under the mandate to love one another with

enough visible authenticity that the world will understand, and be attracted to, the faith we profess. I said that Presbyterians, perhaps more than any other Protestant denomination, have a regrettable history of resolving internal conflicts by walking away from one another and forming a new denomination.

In the final session, Mouw and I had a conversation using Leonard Swidler's "Dialogue Decalogue"—ten guidelines for engaging in constructive conversation with someone with whom one differs. Mouw spoke about Charles Hodge, a 19th-century Reformed theologian and fierce opponent of theological liberalism. Hodge found the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher so wrong and distasteful that he wrote 15 pages rigorously critiquing Schleiermacher's ideas. Yet in a footnote at the end of Hodge's critique, he noted that it was Schleiermacher's personal practice to gather his children around the family piano after dinner to "sing praises to the Lord Jesus." Hodge said he was confident that Schleiermacher, who died shortly before Hodge's critique was published, "was now singing praises to the Lord Jesus face to face."

I have been an active advocate on the liberal side of most of the critical and divisive issues the church has faced in the last 50 years—on race, the role of women, poverty, sexual orientation, the environment. I am no stranger to strong debate, criticism and incivility. So I was deeply touched by hearing how Charles Hodge maintained a respectful and civil relationship with a man with whom he could not have disagreed more. I was also touched by Richard Mouw's kindness and civility. It gave me hope for my church.

The experience also made me newly impatient with our less than civil, less than loving ways of disagreeing. What the world sees of the ways that Christians disagree is far from impressive—and is sometimes repulsive. It must make Jesus weep.

THEN & NOW

edited by *Edward J. Blum*

"Then and Now" is a weekly online feature in which scholarly expertise connects with the faith, hope and love of historians who reflect on the lessons of the past to illumine the issues of the present.

Visit **christiancentury.org**

"Then and Now" features various writers, including **Edward J. Blum**, professor of history at San Diego State University. Blum recently wrote, with Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*.



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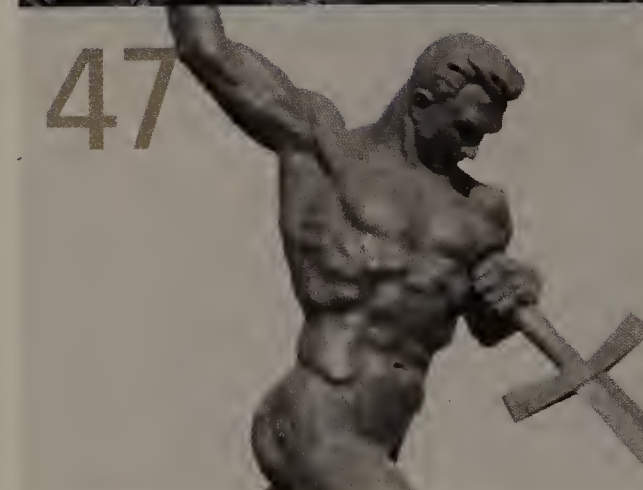
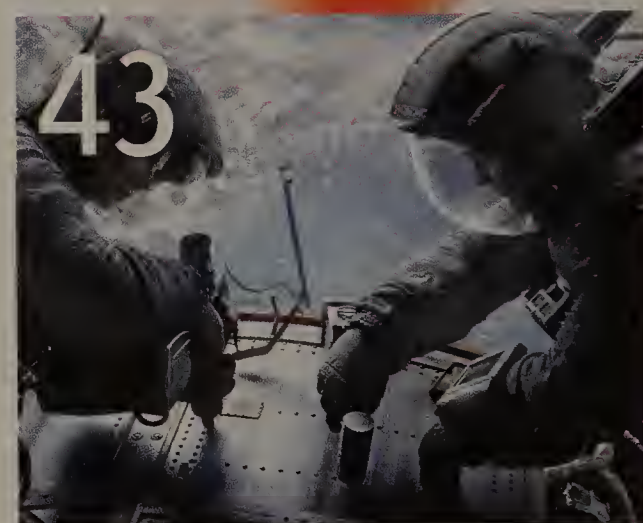
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Who is the lectionary for?

Who is preaching for and who is the lectionary for? These questions linger after reading Steve Thorngate's "What's the text?" (Oct. 30). All too often when lectionary matters are considered, the focus is on the preacher. "What new texts can I preach on? I'm bored preaching on the Good Shepherd . . . again!" But preaching is for the assembly.

As a layperson and church musician, I've experienced how the lectionary becomes new for an assembly each time a text is heard. Though the text may be the same, our lives are always new. The world is ever changing, and amid these changes, familiar readings will resonate differently. "The Good Samaritan" says something new set next to the Trayvon Martin verdict. "Rejoice, for God is in the midst of you" during Advent speaks to the already/not yet of God's coming in the wake of the massacre at the Sandy Hook elementary school.

So I say to preachers and all who prepare for worship: if the texts do not allow you to bear the good news of Jesus Christ, then perhaps you are not paying close enough attention. Instead of focusing on what might be new and clever to you, focus on the always new word of God, proclaimed in word, song and sacrament.

Jennifer Baker-Trinity
Middleburg, Pa.

I am grateful for Thorngate's survey of lectionaries, but I miss any attention to the theological rationale for the *Revised Common Lectionary*. Instead of seeing the "homiletical tyranny of the Gospels," one might recognize the theology of the Sunday assembly.

We gather on the Lord's Day around the crucified and risen Christ, proclaimed in the Gospel, encountered with burning hearts in the other scriptures and met in the breaking of the bread. The *RCL* is a eucharistic lectionary for Sundays, and its richly interacting texts belong to all the assembly, not simply to the individual plans of the preacher. I, for one, profoundly hope that congrega-

tions will persevere in using the increasingly ecumenical *RCL*.

Gordon Lathrop
Philadelphia, Pa.

False options . . .

John Buchanan grieves over the behavior of our government ("Praying for Syria," Oct. 16). I grieve, also, that in his endorsement of Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism he implies that Christians have only two options: withdrawal from the world or ultimate reliance on violence.

Jacques Ellul described two tasks of Christians: affirm, teach and live absolutely Jesus' clear rejection of violence and advocate to the powerful—with whatever intelligence, political sophistication and energy one has—on behalf of the oppressed—not to improve any government enough so that it might appear to be the means of transforming the world, but to manifest the already real dominion of God.

Jesus and Paul acknowledge that these tasks seem foolish. Have we enough faith to trust that God's promises are neither metaphors nor platitudes? Might our sadness at the tragedies of this world be relieved somewhat by knowing that we can actually row the boat of discipleship with all our strength—and leave the steering, and our final destination, to God?

Bradford D. Boyd-Kennedy
Columbia, Mo.

Animating faith . . .

Given Jason Byassee's familiarity with multimedia resources for faith formation, I am a bit surprised by his reaction to the *Animate* video series ("Eight minutes of wisdom," Oct. 2). I think he wants the videos to be more than they possibly could be.

Any of us who preach know how difficult it is to pack all the content we wish to convey into a 10-to-15-minute message. Oral presentations are often more gener-

al and evocative than tightly reasoned essays in academic theology. Most of us know this—which is why we refer to monographs and journal articles in our dissertations but watch videos with our new member and high school classes.

Byassee writes that *Animate's* topics "are ones that have grabbed the church's best thinkers for millennia, and to whittle them down to fit an eight-minute talk seems a disservice, even in an attention-scattered age." And he says that the course is "packaged for those new to church" and "seems better suited to those seeking to replace a thoughtless or harmful faith."

I don't think the series was designed to present a comprehensive dogmatic. The videos open up discussions. They were designed to *animate* faith, after all, not encompass the whole faith.

Most of them are actually closer to 15 minutes in length, not eight minutes. And the whole course is designed for much lengthier engagement with the topic. The videos are only the tip of the iceberg. Much more important for the series are the journaling and discussion that follows.

The series is quite intentionally designed, as Byassee observes, for those seeking to replace a thoughtless or harmful faith. Or perhaps for those who have been harmed by thoughtless faith.

Clint Schnekloth
Fayetteville, Ark.

Baptist hospitality . . .

Thank you for the interview with Scott Korb on Zaytuna College, "Liberal arts for Muslims" (Sept. 4). I wish the article had noted that Zaytuna is currently located on the campus of the American Baptist Seminary of the West in Berkeley. The hospitality of ABSW stands as an important counter to the anti-Muslim stance so prominent in much of the Baptist tradition.

H. James Hopkins
Chair, Board of Trustees,
American Baptist Seminary of the West
Oakland, Calif.

November 13, 2013

Persecuted

In Eritrea, one of the earliest Christian countries in the world, a military compound has been turned into a prison complex housing 2,000 to 3,000 Christians. They are imprisoned because they are part of a small independent Protestant community that is not approved by the government.

Eritrea is far from the only place where Christians are suffering for their faith. According to the International Society for Human Rights, 80 percent of all acts of religious discrimination in the world are directed toward Christians. John L. Allen Jr., author of *The Global War on Christians: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Anti-Christian Persecution*, says that the global war on Christians is the greatest story not being told in the 21st century. By one estimate, as many as 11 Christians are killed each hour somewhere in the world. The Pew Forum reported that, between 2006 and 2010, Christians faced some form of discrimination in 139 countries—close to three-fourths of all the nations of the world.

Of the 65 churches in Baghdad, 40 have been bombed since the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003. Iraq had a flourishing Christian community of about 1.5 million at the start of the war; now it is a third that size. In Egypt, 40 Coptic churches were burned and looted in August in a wave of attacks blamed on radical Islamists. In September a suicide bomber attacked a church in northwestern Pakistan, killing 85 people. Living under strict antiblasphemy laws, Christians throughout the country are being accused of blasphemy because of their Christian convictions. In Syria, Christians are caught in the cross fire of a civil war and are targeted by radicals on both sides.

Persecution is occurring not only in the Middle East but in Nigeria, Kenya, Burma, India and North Korea. North Korea may be the worst place in the world to be a Christian; it's believed that a quarter of the country's Christians live in forced-labor camps.

Allen says that one reason the story isn't being told is that many people in the West, having learned about the history of Christian imperialism, have trouble believing that Christians are among the oppressed, not the oppressors. Others are wary of the anti-Muslim fervor that fuels some people's focus on Christian persecution.

Christians are concerned wherever and whenever people are denied religious freedom, but we have a special bond with other Christians. In solidarity, we can educate ourselves about their plight. We can hear their stories and listen to their perspective on the world—which may not match the perspective of American Christians. We can petition our government to keep the plight of Christians in view. And we can pray. A good day to do that is on the International Day of Prayer for Persecuted Christians (sponsored by the Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance), which this year is November 10.

Most acts of discrimination in the world are directed at Christians.

CENTURY marks

OLD ATHEISM: Near the end of his career, Karl Barth was asked to write a response to an essay by atheist Max Bense. Barth's response reflected his sense that Christians don't need to argue better than atheists, they need to live better. He called his response "The Rationality of Discipleship" (not "The Rationality of Theism"). Barth wondered why Bense felt the need to attack Christian faith when there are so many gods plaguing modernity: money, sex, sports. But Barth reserved his sharpest barbs for Christians. Practical atheism, which exists even in the church, is the really pernicious kind of atheism, he said. Practical atheists acknowledge God's existence, yet they go about life as though God doesn't exist. "The atheists of the other kind live on the fact that we are not better Christians" (*Theology Today*, October).

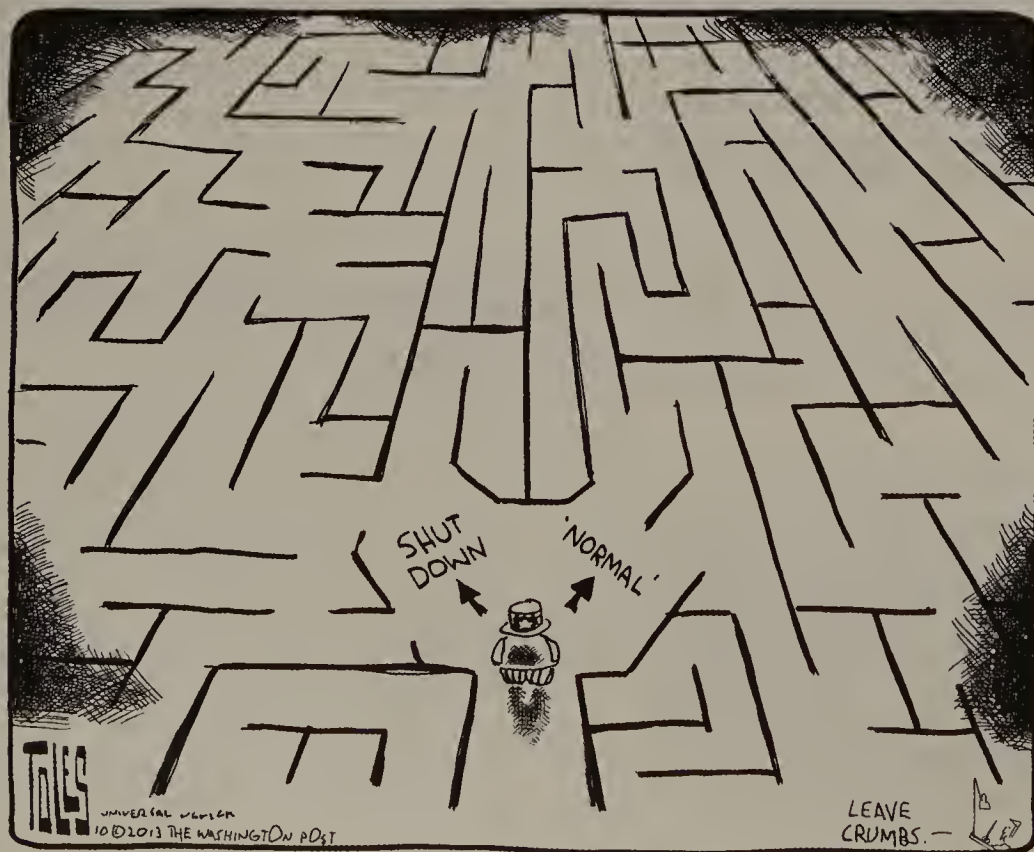
SAVING SOULS: The Soul Repair Center at Brite Divinity School is helping veterans deal with the moral injuries sustained in war. "If there's one thing that is truly hurt when you go to war, it is your soul," said Stacy Keyte, herself an Iraq war veteran. "I think we have to stop talking about whether the war is just, and we have to start looking at what war does to people." The center estimates that a third of war veterans experience moral injury, which it describes as the result of "having to make difficult moral choices under extreme conditions, experiencing morally anguishing events or duties, witnessing immoral acts or behaving in ways that profoundly challenge" their own values. Treatment involves getting veterans to open up about their experiences, forgive themselves, engage in nonmilitary service to others and form long-term plans rather than focusing on the past.

Moral injuries are distinct from posttraumatic stress, which is an identifiable brain injury that can be diagnosed and treated (*Fort Worth Weekly*, October 9).

DON'T SHOOT: Heen (not his real name) was a soldier in Assad's Syrian army who was imprisoned and tortured for refusing to shoot civilians. His unit was ordered to fire on some men coming out of a mosque one Friday. He told five other men with him to disobey the order and shoot over the civilians. His punishment included being hung by his arms to a pipe for what he thinks was five days. He was also put in a cell so crowded that the inmates could not lie down. Eventually he was freed and told he had to go back to his unit. He got forged papers that allowed him a leave, and he subsequently escaped to Iraq (*Daily Beast*, September 5).

CRUEL AND UNUSUAL: When William Hopp, convicted of killing a 21-year-old woman in 1986, was executed by lethal injection in Florida last month, the state used a new combination of drugs. It took 14 minutes for him to die—twice as long as usual. Hopp appeared to remain conscious longer than usual and was moving after he was unconscious. "This is somewhat of an experiment on a living human being," said Richard Dieter, executive director of the Death Penalty Information Center, speculating that Hopp could have been in severe pain and unable to express it. The state used midazolam hydrochloride as the initial drug of three rather than the barbiturate pentobarbital. The manufacturer of pentobarbital has banned its use for future executions (*Daily Mail*, October 15).

SOLAR POWERED: To fulfill a 2010 pledge, President Obama had American-



made solar panels installed at the White House last summer. This is not the first time the White House has had solar panels. President Carter installed some in the late 1970s to produce hot water, but President Reagan had them removed. In 2003 President George W. Bush had a photovoltaic system with two solar panels installed on a maintenance building to heat the White House swimming pool (*Washington Post*, August 15).

RACE CARD: Political conservatives in the United States are acutely aware of race, says veteran pollster Stan Greenberg. “They are very aware that they are ‘white’ in a country that is becoming increasingly ‘minority.’” They are inclined to believe that government programs exist for the benefit of minorities, not the poor. Obamacare has become a flash point for race-conscious conservatives, who think it will disproportionately help minorities. Obama, the first black president, is an emblem of their uneasiness. The word they’re most likely to use to describe him is *liar* (*Guardian*, October 20).

BEST EVER: For its “Big Question” column the *Atlantic* (October) asked a number of public figures what was the greatest speech ever given, historical or fictional. Some of the answers were predictable: soliloquies from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural speech and Winston Churchill’s speech before the House of Commons in 1940 when he said, “We shall never surrender.” Two persons chose Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and Sermon on the Plain, even though they probably weren’t delivered as a single speech. “Although it does not have the same cachet as the Sermon on the Mount, the Sermon on the Plain is a shorter and more cogent speech,” said James Carville, former campaign manager for Bill Clinton.

ORIGINS: The discovery of a 1.8 million-year-old skull in Georgia will radically alter thinking about human origins, according to a research team’s report in *Science*. Comparing this skull to other specimens from the same era in Africa led the team to conclude that humanity’s early ancestors all came from one species in Africa rather than from several as pre-

“I see us entering a world divided not just between the haves and have-nots, but also between the countries that do nothing about it and those that do. Some countries will be successful in creating shared prosperity—the only kind of prosperity that I believe is truly sustainable.”

— Economist **Joseph E. Stiglitz**, noting that other industrial countries are following the United States in showing a widening gap between the rich and poor (*New York Times* blog, October 13)

“There is nothing ‘pro-life’ or Christian about taking food away from pregnant women and babies. It is hypocritical and shameful for those who tout their commitment to family values to show such callous indifference.”

— from a statement to the U.S. Congress issued by more than 100 Catholic, evangelical and mainline Protestant leaders rebuking Congress for sharp cuts in spending for poor and vulnerable families (*Faith in Public Life*, October 3)

viously thought. It is likely the remains of a tool-using species dubbed *Homo erectus*, who had a brain one-third the size of a modern human brain. Similar remains have been found in Africa, Spain, Indonesia, India, China and Java (*Wall Street Journal*, October 17).

CATHOLIC WIT: Comedian Stephen Colbert, keynote speaker at the Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner in Manhattan, joked that he’s “proud to be America’s most famous Catholic.” With New York cardinal Timothy Dolan sitting next to him on the dais, Colbert said, “And I’m sure the cardinal is thinking, ‘Stephen, pride is a sin.’ Well, cardinal, so is envy, so we’re even.” Colbert even took

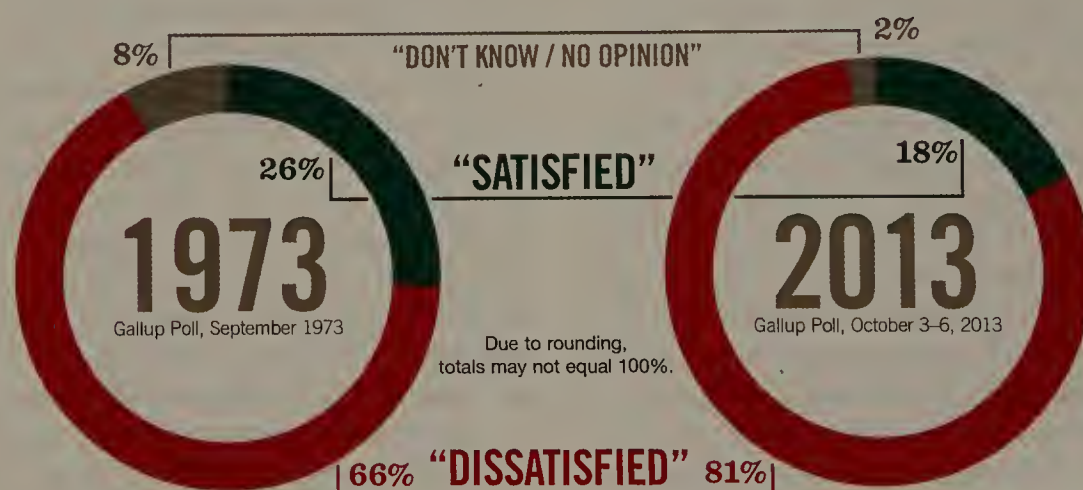
a poke at the modest Pope Francis, saying that if the pope had planned this black-tie event, it would have been held at the local iHop restaurant (AP).

A PROBLEM WITH JESUS: Some Swedish Christians tell about an aged and pious church member who was always quoting Jesus and was sharply critical of her fellow church members for drinking wine. If her congregation ever started serving wine for communion instead of grape juice, she said she’d have to leave the church. When others reminded her that Jesus drank wine, she replied: “You know, that’s the *one thing* about Jesus that I never liked” (Martin E. Marty, *Sightings*, October 14).

NO SATISFACTION

SOURCE: ROPER CENTER FOR PUBLIC RESEARCH

On how Americans respond to the way the U.S. is being governed:



Grandmother's communion

BY BRIAN DOYLE

MY PATERNAL grandmother, blessed be her memory, lived at the north end of our little village, in a neighborhood called Tiny Town for the minuscule cabins and cottages there, arranged in concentric circles. The neighborhood, once the site of a midden of clam and oyster shells left by the first people in the area, had then been for many years a summer campground for religious revivalists from the city, who initially erected tents during their summer revels, and then built tiny cabins and cottages; the revivalists in their turn gave way to settlers, who updated their elvish housing but did not, for various reasons, expand or enlarge them, a habit that persisted deep into the last century.

These revivalists had been Methodists, a fact that delighted my grandmother no end, for you never met a woman with a sharper and more amused tongue about other religions than our own, which would be, of course, the One True Church, Holy and Roman, the Church Eternal, Our Mother the Church, built on the rocky shoulders of St. Peter, watched over by His Holiness the Pontiff, steward of the bridge between God and man. The pope was always Italian, explained my grandmother, because St. Augustine said we should do as the Romans do. I pondered this remark for a while in silence and then confessed to grandmother that I had no idea what she meant by that. She said she didn't either, which was yet another one of the sacred mysteries.

Your Methodists, said my grandmother, pursue a method, but not one of the poor creatures can explain what that means, which tells you all you need to know about the Methodists. The same thing is true with Presbyterians; bless their souls, when you ask them what is a presbyter they stammer and mumble in the most abashed fashion, and then return to making shoes or chipping tomb-

stones or whatever it is they do. Similarly your Episcopalians, who could not identify episcopality if you gave them money and whiskey, and your Congregationalists, whose religion is named for the way people sit in rows. You might as well name yourselves the Gatheralists or the Pew People. And then consider the Lutherans, who are named for a Catholic monk, and the Baptists, who are named for taking baths, and the Calvinists, who are named, God help us all, for a Frenchman. At least the Jews are named for a place they came from, and of course Our Lord Jesus Christ started out Jewish, until the wedding at Cana, where by the virtue of his first public miracle he created the True Faith. He may have done miracles before that time, but of those performed privately we know not. Of the Christian traditions only Catholicism, the One True Faith, is properly named, as you see, because *catholic* means for everybody, which it is.

This was how my grandmother talked, tiny and adamant in her tiny kitchen, and my brothers and I would crowd around the table, eating her cinnamon cookies and peach pies and redolent macaroons and learning a great deal about Catholicism we had not learned at home, where our parents spoke of saints like Floyd Patterson, who was a Knight of Columbus when he wasn't engaged in unseemly but eminently remunerative fisticuffs, as our dad said. That is still how our dad talks, in a cheerfully opulent way, spiced with brief but memorable lectures on such things as Fulton Sheen's florid use of capes and cloaks, the good old days when the Catholic Church owned most of the best vineyards in the world, and why the Crusades were mere brutal terrorist expeditions, not at all admirable religious adventures to reclaim holy land, as if possessiveness was holy in the least, the greed for possession being the root of all evils, as we have many times discussed, haven't we, boys?

One of my younger brothers once asked our grandmother about other forms of Catholicism (we had just learned about Chaldean and Ethiopian Catholic churches in school), and she hooted and said those poor fledglings will soon be back in full communion with the Church Eternal. They were not unlike adolescents who explore out to the far limits of good sense and behavior and then slowly return to intelligent existence as they fitfully mature, like some boys *I* know will not, I hope, do, but I pray they mature apace, making the smallest of mistakes and committing only the most venial of sins, and yes, Brian, I am looking at you.


Another time we ventured to ask our grandmother about all the other religious traditions other than the ones we would call Christian, for example, Islam and Buddhism, and this time she surprised us, for she was wonderfully respectful, in her way. I have the greatest respect for other traditions, she said, if they are anywhere near sane and do not advocate or condone the worship of bundles of sticks or golden calves or clay figurines or whatnot. You have to admire the religious impulse, which is an inherent and natural thing in us and takes endlessly curious forms, until it arrives finally at the Church Eternal. To disrespect or denigrate such other religions would be like denigrating children for not being adults yet. It would offend nature. Also they tend to wear bright clothing, which is pleasant. You will notice, boys, that the Church Eternal has settled on black and white as our general issue colors, with red and green for special occasions, purple to indicate rank and authority, and blue reserved for the Mother of us all. To be honest, there are times when I wish we would throw in a little brilliant orange or shocking yellow here and there, just for the summery lift and laugh of it, but one great thing about the Church Eternal is the sure knowledge that whatever it is we do, we do for the best and right reason, whether we understand it or not. So the lesson would be that even I do not yet grasp why we have shelved some colors but celebrate

Brian Doyle is editor of Portland magazine and author of Grace Notes.

others. But there's always room to learn, boys. There's always room to learn.

Our grandmother died suddenly before any of us muddled into adolescence, and as one of my brothers recently observed, maybe this was for the best, as our grandmother did not have to witness our tumultuous teenage years, which entailed sprinting headlong away from the Church Eternal, among other venial sins, before we shuffled and shambled back to the faith later, abashed and

wiser. Our dad oversaw the sale of her tiny cabin in Tiny Town to the grandson of one of the original summer revivalist preachers, and my brothers and I well remember the day we came to clear our grandmother's few possessions from the cabin before it changed hands. Everything she owned fit into three boxes. Most of what she owned was in her kitchen, and it seemed to us that almost all of her kitchenware was designed to make and hold food for us; as our dad

said gently on the way home, *communion* and *Eucharist* are much larger words than we think they are, boys. But the box that all of us brothers remember with amazement even now was the third one, packed with what we found in a tiny closet in her bedroom—an array of blouses and skirts and scarves and sweaters of the most brilliant, glorious, wonderful oranges and yellows we had ever seen, some of them so bright you had to shield your eyes. 

Discipleship as leadership

Why lead?

by Adam J. Copeland

THE SIGNATURE that was automatically included at the bottom of the student's e-mail message listed her college major, the semester that she'd spent studying abroad, a work-study job and her participation in various honor societies, choirs and councils. If the e-mail had been responding to a job offer, I'd have understood why she added this information. If I were a talent scout, perhaps I'd get used to the litany of credentials. But as a college professor I found all this information to be a kind of unsolicited festival of her leadership potential. Is it also a symptom of a misguided concept of leadership?

Leadership is big these days. The pages of the *CENTURY* are filled with ads for church leadership conferences. Duke Divinity School runs a leadership blog. I myself direct a program in faith and leadership for a church-related college. On my bookshelf are titles such as *Leadership on the Line*, *The Spirit-Driven Leader* and *Leadership for a Better World*. My students are hounded from their first week of orientation until graduation with invitations to attend leadership workshops,

build their leadership résumé and be sent into the world ready to lead.

I have nothing against leadership or leaders and sometimes claim the role myself. But I've become suspicious of our emphasis on what looks more and more like leadership for leadership's sake. We may be missing the point.

When I reflect on my experience in the church, I realize that the leaders to whom I'm most drawn are those who *follow* as much as they lead. The distinction can be difficult to detect, as it's usually a matter of disposition, self-awareness and spiritual practice. But the fact is that God calls all of us—no matter the length of our e-mail signature and number of credentials—to *follow* Jesus Christ. Following may eventually require leadership, but it's a particular sort of leadership that's centered and unpretentious.

Around the time of desegregation, black congregations were sending delegations to visit white congregations on Sunday mornings as a witness to the need for integration. There's a story about some elders at one white church who heard about the upcoming visit from blacks and hastily called a

meeting. How could they keep the visitors away, many elders wondered. After listening to the debate, the pastor finally spoke up. "You elders can do what you want, but the instant that one of our brothers and sisters is shown anything but the finest Christian hospitality, I'll be leaving the pulpit and not coming back." That settled it.

That pastor demonstrated leadership. But in my mind his powerful words were more about following Jesus' call for justice than bolstering his cred as leader-of-the-month. That pastor didn't wait to consult a leadership coach, pause to "get on the balcony" or take a poll of his core members' opinions. A prayerful, faithful man, he followed the faith in his heart regardless of the elders' anxieties. It looked like leadership, but it was actually followership.

We seem more concerned with equipping our young people with leadership training than with discipleship practices. My students attend myriad leadership seminars, lead student organizations and

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hear lectures given by famous leaders. These opportunities usually address the *how* of leadership, but they rarely address the *why*.

The story of Jesus calling the disciples in Matthew 4 addresses the *why*. There's something endearing about how the first disciples drop their fishing nets and follow this man named Jesus. I remember learning the story in Sunday school and acting it out wearing musty, badly fitting costumes. I had no idea what it meant to be fishers of people, but it was fun to mimic throwing away the fishing nets.

Now when I read the story I'm struck more with fear than amusement. This simple story, spare of detail, is a testament to the power of Jesus' call. When Jesus called to Peter and Andrew on that beach he did not say, "Here are my long-term objectives. Talk my proposal through with your stakeholders at your annual meeting and let me know if your analysis suggests the mission is scalable." Instead, Jesus was abrupt. He

said, "Follow," and the spontaneity frightens me. How do I teach this impromptu, instinctive followership to my students?

I know a pastor who received a phone call from a migrant farmworker. A group of 20 workers had traveled to the state capital to testify before the legislature about immigration reform and farm labor laws, but the hearing had been pushed back a day. Not knowing where to turn, the leader began calling downtown churches.


"We need a place to sleep," the farmworker explained when the pastor picked up the phone.

"You mean tonight?" the pastor gulped.

"Sí," he said, "can you help us?"

After a few seconds of silence the pastor responded, "Of course we can. We'll have dinner ready at 6:30 and as many sleeping bags as we can find. We'd love to welcome you at our church. We'll see you tonight."

Following Jesus, even today, can be shockingly abrupt. I bet that pastor angered some members of her congregation that night. Her quick response may not have gained her social capital. There was probably a flurry of e-mails. But that evening over chili and corn bread, her congregation was *following* as its members fished for people.

Our world desperately needs leaders, but not just any kind of leaders. Lines automatically printed at the bottom of an e-mail may be outwardly impressive, but they mean little when it comes to the heart of leading. We need leaders with a passion for the gospel, with Bibles that are worn, with ears to hear and with communities to support them. We need leaders drawn to the work of building God's kingdom instead of building their résumés. We need leaders with admirable ethics and deep faith foundations. We need leaders who follow. 

A journalist and poet

Words against fear

by Eliza Griswold

IN BOTH poetry and journalism, I've always been drawn to the edges of metaphysical and physical places. A poem is a prayer, and a risky one at that: reading or writing a poem requires that we step out of ourselves. We have to enter the world of the poem, and this can be dangerous. As a foreign correspondent, I do the same thing. I lean on certain basic tools, above all a willingness to slow down, step out of myself and listen to what's happening around me. Both vocations require a love of looking and a tendency toward fierce self-appraisal in order to scour away as much of the muddy distortion that ego offers in a given moment. Both require a

nose capable of sniffing out the closest thing to truth.

Growing up as the child of an Episcopal priest in suburban Philadelphia, I frequently felt out of sync with the comfortable, "ordinary" world that surrounded us. I felt that we lived at the portal to a sacred and dangerous world. I was painfully aware, as so many children are, that where our family lived was weird. Our flagstone and clapboard house might look like the others on the block, but it led away from the familiar land of school plays, ice skating and tennis lessons. We lived next to the church in the rectory, on semisanctified and conse-

crated ground. I had a profound sense that the home we lived in was borrowed. It didn't belong to us. It was a sanctuary for those in need of pastoral counseling, which sometimes took unusual forms.

One afternoon my mother and I returned home from my school to find a thief wandering around upstairs in our house. We must have surprised him, for luckily he took nothing. When we confronted him, he descended our front stairs in a sport coat and offered this elegant and impossible lie: he'd mistaken the rectory for the local college.

My mother said nothing, of course. What could she say? Her role was to wel-

come wayward strangers. Until that afternoon, the door to our home had never been locked. Instead my dad had offered us other kinds of protection: he once took a piece of my blue sidewalk chalk and scrawled a Greek prayer of safekeeping on the kitchen lintel.

As a child I was drawn to Emily Dickinson for her quiet ferocity—and no doubt because her cadences were rooted in those of the Protestant hymnal with which I spent so much time. On my bedroom wall hung a watercolor of one of her poems. It began:

Hope is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the
words—
And never stops—at all—

I clung to other scraps of folk prayer and song that I picked up half-consciously:

Touch the lintel, touch the wall
Nothing but blessings here befall.

Along with the Dickinson poem, I used to soothe myself by repeating these lines.

Yes, they were incantatory; they were also poetry. As I grew older, words became my most powerful talismans against the fearful world of potentially dangerous visitors and the spirits whom I believed dwelled in the in-between place—the limbo—that our home provided for them.

Words also offered me a curious gift: they taught me that I was safe, and could be safe, far from the wealthy world of the suburbs. From the point of earliest memory, I felt I was an interloper in the world of boxwood hedges and heady whiffs of chlorine from other people's swimming pools. I eventually decided that safety wasn't physical, like a fence or a locked door. It was something that I carried with me, or what I later learned was a metaphysical state. I could take comfort from words in the most desolate locations, whether in stories or drawn from the world around me. As a child, the Maine coast became one such place; its bleakness was a salve to a primal wound I couldn't identify—the reflection of a subtle inner state.

As an adult I have found solace in another kind of bleakness: the far-flung and troubled corners of Africa and Asia. I've worked in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and many of the other messy places that have made the news over the last decade. But it's the liminal places—the borders—that draw me most. I spent seven years traveling along the fraught fault line where Christianity and Islam meet in Africa and Asia to ask what role religion plays in fomenting violence between these two global forces. In Nigeria, Sudan, Somalia, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, I've investigated church burnings and the desecration of mosques, as well as the massacres of both Christians and Muslims. I've examined the role that religious violence plays in political elections, droughts, floods and even arguments over electricity and drinking water.

Out of this work, I write as a journalist. At the same time, I keep one eye out for what sparks my poems: situations, people, moments that challenge me and things that I can't understand. Through poetry and journalism, I carry my childhood totem of language to define the utmost edges of human experience. **CC**

Eliza Griswold is a journalist and author of The Tenth Parallel.

Foot washing

The congregation of pilled sweaters gathers.
The least of them my brethren, their terrible feet unpeel
from comfortable shoes. They come to be healed by my father
through my father who kneels before them with a bowl a monk threw
on a potter's wheel near the rocks of the Dry Salvages.
Among the fusty velvet pews, timelessness collides
with time incarnate in human weakness, raw skin, yellow corns.
Here, among us, there are so few strong among us,
so many reeking needs, such fervent despair,
I long to bare my baby teeth, to lunge at the wretched.
God save us from those who wish to be saved in this suburban church,
its reenactment intended to puncture time
while the hollow chime of tennis balls from the next door courts
rings with the sacrilege of a Sunday plough.

—EG

Waiting for the volcano

for R. H.

Our high-speed hydrofoil is late.
We wait in the island's worst places,
Aeolian churches. Bartholomew,
the aging patron saint, drapes
his flayed skin over one arm,
a sommelier or thespian.
Harrowing renders us raw,
unclods soil and frees a captive field.
The boatman hectors lesbians,
insists on learning where they swim.
I'm glad you don't understand
the Italian that I barely can.
There's nowhere on this island
that doesn't turn us more
against ourselves or one another—
too many days in paradise
for minds like ours.

—EG

If it is not ‘mainline,’ what is it?

Is there a better name for mainline Protestants? How about vintage Protestants? Or the VPCC—Vanishing Progressive Christian Church? Or the Legacy Church?

Half a century ago, the denominations under the mainline umbrella dominated the American faith landscape. Now, after decades of decline in numbers, only about one in five adults identifies with a mainline denomination such as the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) or the American Baptist Churches USA.

Could replacing the “mainline” label help stem the slide? The challenge to find a new name came from scholar and Presbyterian pastor Carol Howard Merritt. Writing in her blog, hosted by the CHRISTIAN CENTURY, she called for a new brand that conveys her view of the mainline’s rising diversity and social justice leadership.

“The image of an all-white, elitist church is not going to fly for generations to come,” said Merritt, an author and speaker who lives in Chattanooga, Tennessee. “‘Mainline’ was a good historic marker, but the future needs to reflect who we are now.”

Religion News Service took up the challenge, inviting votes and comments in an informal survey. More than 200 people voted. The comments ranged from theological to historical, serious to snarky.

“Liberal Church” led with 24 percent of the votes. Some liked the social and political connotation, but others used *liberal* as a slam on a church they regard as too loose on doctrines of sin and salvation. Merritt said October 15 that she preferred a different spin on liberal: “Liberationist Church,” because “it taps into the good news that our beliefs lead us to seek liberation for all the oppressed, to expand freedom for all.”

Next, at 17 percent, were those who

said labels just don’t work for religious distinctions anymore. National surveys find growing numbers just want to call themselves “Christian.”

“Oldline” was favored in 6 percent of the votes. “Grandma’s Church” drew 3 percent. It has the ring of truth: mainline churches have the greatest percentage of members age 65 and older of any Christian tradition.

Most folks—46 percent—preferred their own picks.



RNS / KEVIN ECKSTROM

REBRANDING THE MAINLINE: Commentators search for a term other than mainline to describe churches like this one—New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C.

Fans of the mainline highlighted historical faith and social gospel activism:

The “Refined Church” came from Carlton E. Allen. “The term plays off of Reformed” but suggests a church that has been “through the fire . . . tried and tested and resistant to fads.”

Social scientist and blogger Mark Silk would stick with *mainline* because “it

identifies a social location in American communities—a religious tradition that takes a broad view of its responsibilities to the community at large—that continues to serve as meaningful shorthand.” Alicia Lowry Walker wrote that the old name worked fine to attract her to a mainline congregation that is growing “primarily due to young families from evangelical backgrounds like mine.”

John McGrath suggested “Forward Christians” because, he says, “these denominations generally move forward as the meaning of scripture unfolds through better scholarship, translation, and prayerful reflection on the essential humanness of Christ.”

Critics, however, skewered the mainline as a theological washout.

Shawne Rantlett called them “the Churches Formerly Known as Christian, or the Syncretist Churches.”

Ken Peters suggested “the Unorthodox Churches. Their liberalized doctrines should be noted as unorthodox.”

Martha Carlson had another twist: “Since the evangelicals are now claiming majority, we should start calling them Mainline! They could then bear the weight of being ‘established,’ ‘establishment,’ or at least all being tarred by the same brush when it comes to popular opinion that all the members of a group think alike.”

John Leech offered “Legacy Denominations” because, he wrote, they are “like legacy airlines, carrying a lot of baggage from the past . . . But wait! I still have lots of miles to redeem!”

Merritt’s own first choice: “Social Justice Christian.” She said the term conveys “the exciting and vibrant thought that has come out of our tradition in the last hundred years or so [to] . . . proclaim the good news that leads us to liberation and salvation.” —Cathy Lynn Grossman, RNS

Church news outlets struggle to maintain editorial independence

The closing of several Protestant denominational newspapers, magazines and other news services has played a part in eroding the standards of professional religious journalism, according to members of the Associated Church Press.

As denominational news services contend with fiscal challenges that have beset secular media as well, church press officials worry that these outlets have lost their editorial independence and are increasingly performing a public relations role for their denominations.

"There has been a strong commitment on the part of many denominations to promote religious journalism that lives up to the standards of what professional journalism should be," said Meinrad Scherer-Emunds, chair of the ACP Religious Journalism Task Force. "We feel that has been limited in more recent years."

Jay Voorhees, executive editor of the *United Methodist Reporter*, bought the digital assets of the publication after it ceased publication in May when UMR Communications closed after months of financial losses.

Voorhees now runs it as a much smaller, web-only publication. He and a few others work on the publication part-time, hoping to continue the newspaper's legacy.

"We still think there is an important need for a voice in the Methodist Church that is independently operated from the official Methodist structure," Voorhees said. "The reality is that it's very, very difficult to find a funding model that will allow for independent journalism that is not simply regurgitating what is coming out in press releases from denominational agencies."

Voorhees said many church publications are based on print models, which are no longer financially viable. "I think it's going to be difficult for these organizations to respond to these changes that are required by this new world that we live in," Voorhees said.

Publications that have shut their doors include the *Progressive Christian*, *Episcopal Life*, *United Church News* and the *Church Herald*.

Joe Thoma, executive director of the ACP, said his organization has seen a "significant change" in its membership as news services contract. Many denominations have resorted to telling the "good news" only, Thoma said.

Verity Jones, executive director of the Center for Pastoral Excellence at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, said this shift toward public relations led the ACP, which has more than 100 member organizations, to write a statement affirming religious journalism.

"We were seeing the eroding of support for and trust in an independent voice within traditions and denominations reporting the news," said Jones, a former editor of *DisciplesWorld*, which ceased publication in 2010.

"It's not optional, because the free exchange of ideas is central to the living out of Christian community. It's important for accountability; it's important for news sharing." Jones, who serves on the board of Religion News Service, added that sometimes news is not good for a denomination, pointing to scandals involving clergy sexual abuse of minors as an example.

—Katherine Burgess, RNS

Methodists mull whether to allow online communion

AS ONLINE WORSHIP becomes more common in some churches, leaders within the United Methodist Church are debating whether the denomination should condone online communion.

About 30 denominational leaders met in early October after Central United Methodist Church in Concord, North Carolina, announced plans to launch an online campus that potentially would offer online communion.

Some nondenominational churches already offer online communion, according to United Methodist News Service, but leaders urged the denomination's bishops to call for a moratorium on the practice and do further study of online ministries.

The majority of the leaders agreed with the statement that communion "entails the actual tactile sharing of bread and wine in a service that involves people corporeally together in the same place." Not everyone, however, agreed that congregants must be in the same place.

The debate raises fundamental questions at the heart of the church experience: the definition of community, individual participation, the role of tradition

and basic theological understandings of the meaning of communion.

United Methodists practice open communion, meaning all who worship are invited to partake. Many churches celebrate communion once a month, though each church decides how often to serve it.

A move toward accepting online communion might be inevitable in some quarters, given the denomination's history, said Mark Tooley, a Methodist who is president of the conservative Institute on Religion and Democracy. "Methodists have a long history of pragmatism, which might make them a little more susceptible," Tooley said.

Communion takes on different forms among various Christian denominations, but it generally involves the reenactment of Jesus' Last Supper by taking bread and wine (or, as the UMC prefers, unfermented grape juice).

Also called the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper, many Protestants see the rite as an expression of faith rather than the reception of the body and blood of Jesus, as the Catholic Church teaches.

Many churches have launched online



options for church activities, including worship, seminary, ordination counseling and financial giving. Despite the growing availability of church resources online, participating in communion has mostly remained a part of the physical act of worship in a congregation.

With Methodists' history of itinerant evangelism spread through circuit-riding preaching, online communion fits with the denomination's populist bent, said Stephen Gunter, associate dean for Methodist studies at Duke Divinity School. "It's always been about how we get the gospel to the next person," he said.

But Methodists also have a history of accountability, checking on one another's spiritual life, Gunter said. "I can't see how someone [who's] satisfied to be in front of a TV or computer screen would be interested in being held accountable to anything."

Some worry that online communication is becoming an alternate form of community for Christians.

"Digital mediation is now preferred to the immediacy of embodied conversation," wrote Brent Laytham, dean of the Ecumenical Institute of Theology and professor of theology at St. Mary's Seminary and University. "Like a hug or a kiss, like incarnation and resurrection, communion requires bodies that touch."

It is difficult to tell how many churches are offering online worship or online communion as part of their regular services.

A LifeWay Research survey of a thousand Protestant churches found that while 78 percent have a website, less than half of them use their sites for interactive purposes, such as obtaining and distributing prayer requests (43 percent), registering people for events (39 percent) and automating other church processes (30 percent).

Scott Thumma, a sociologist of religion at Hartford Seminary, said none of the 80 or so churches that he has studied that offer online services also offer virtual communion. "In many ways this is a parallel discussion to the earlier debate about whether online community is 'real' community," Thumma said.

Eventually the Methodists' debate over online communion could be presented before the General Conference, the denomination's top lawmaking body, in 2016 in Portland, Oregon. —Sarah Pulliam Bailey, RNS

New film prompts calls for racial reconciliation

The new movie *12 Years a Slave* may depict a bygone era in American history, but religious leaders hope it might spark increased attention about present-day race relations.

"It is the elephant in the room," said Barbara Williams-Skinner, a facilitator of the National African American Clergy Network, speaking at a panel discussion after a recent screening.

"If you even raise race today, you are 'race baiting.' You're playing 'the race card,'" said Williams-Skinner, who is also the CEO of the Skinner Leadership Institute.

The movie gives an unflinching account of the true story of Solomon Northup, a free man living in Saratoga Springs, New York, who was kidnapped and spent a dozen years as a slave in the South, wrongly accused of being a Georgia runaway.

Clergy and activists hoped the movie, which opened October 18—with its depiction of whippings and other degradation—will be a catalyst for churches to

recall slavery and address the current state of the nation's race relations. They point to controversies from the killing of Florida teen Trayvon Martin to the Supreme Court striking down a major provision of the Voting Rights Act.

Sojourners, the Washington-based antipoverty group, will be circulating "The One Church One Body Pledge" in hopes of starting a new conversation to improve race relations.

"Many white Christians and churches have no connection to what is being felt and said in black churches nationwide—both about fear for their children and fear of losing their voting rights," the pledge reads.

It urges supporters to seek racial reconciliation and help the church become "a multiracial community." It calls on them to "repair our criminal justice system" and urge Congress to "restore the integrity of the Voting Rights Act."

Sojourners' founder, Jim Wallis, tied the stories of families separated in *12 Years a Slave* to often-forgotten African-American children who attend inadequate schools or live on streets where hundreds are shot each year. "It's still going on every damn day," he said.

Michael McBride, a minister and advo-



TALKING ABOUT RACE: (left to right) Jim Wallis of Sojourners, Michael McBride of PICO National Network, Otis Moss III, Barbara Williams-Skinner of the National African American Clergy Network and Galen Carey of the National Association of Evangelicals take part in a panel discussion on *12 Years a Slave* in Washington on October 9.

RNS / BRANDON HOOK / SOJOURNERS

cate on the issue of incarceration with PICO National Network, said he hopes the movie will encourage people to view the punitive aspects of U.S. society as excessive and not “grounded in scripture.”

The film sometimes addresses questions of faith, including a slave master quoting from the Bible at an outdoor worship service, legitimizing his authority to control and whip the slaves gathered before him.

“The faith that they had in the film was really capitalism in drag,” said Otis Moss III, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, speaking of the slave owners depicted in the movie.

Galen Carey, vice president of the National Association of Evangelicals, said there’s no “one step” that will move the church on race relations. But “authentic encounters” in local churches can help.

A small group at his Columbia, Maryland, church discovered a sharp racial disparity among its members over whether they’d listed themselves as organ donors on their driver’s licenses. Black members recalled notorious medical experiments on unsuspecting black men in the mid-1900s.

“Every single African American in our group said, ‘No way would I do that ’cause we can’t trust those people,’” Carey said. “And every white person said, ‘What do you mean?’” —Adelle M. Banks, RNS

Asian Americans upset by stereotypes used in church

Asian-American Christians are voicing concerns over how they’re depicted by white evangelicals, most recently at a conference hosted by Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church in California.

The conference was held by Exponential, a church-planting group, and a video shown on October 8 left some Asian Americans offended.

It’s the second dustup in as many months involving Asian Americans and Warren, who spoke at the Exponential conference.

He received backlash from Asian-American Christians in September after

he posted a Facebook photo depicting the Red Guard during China’s Cultural Revolution. “The typical attitude of Saddleback staff as they start work each day,” the caption read on September 23. Warren later posted an apology.

In the video at Exponential, a pastor jokes about making his church-planting apprentice do menial activities, such as getting him coffee, giving him massages and holding his towel, according to Christine Lee, a Korean-American Episcopal priest who attended the conference.

The apprentice reacts to the pastor in a parody of the *Karate Kid*, the 1984 martial arts film. The pastor begins speaking in a Chinese accent with “typical ‘Oriental’ music” playing in the background, Lee said. They go into a karate segment, and at one point they bow to each other.

“I know they are not trying to be offensive,” Lee said. “I was actually trying to talk myself out of [being offended], but I kept coming back to this question: Would they have done this with black people?”

Saddleback staff declined to comment on the skit since it came from Exponential. Exponential leaders could not be reached for comment.

A group of Asian-American Christians was drafting an open letter to address the larger issue of continued troubling stereotyping of Asian Americans and Asian culture.

“It’s disheartening to believe anyone is having to explain to fellow evangelicals that racist stereotypes are not OK, especially in the church and used in the name of mission,” said Kathy Khang, author and blogger who has been outspoken about race issues.

Several Asian-American Christians commented and blogged in September that the photo Warren posted on social media was distasteful.

“People often miss irony on the Internet. It’s a joke, people! If you take this seriously, you really shouldn’t be following me!” Warren initially posted in a Facebook comment. “Did you know that, using Hebrew ironic humor, Jesus inserted several laugh lines—jokes—in the Sermon on the Mount? The self-righteous missed them all while the disciples were undoubtedly giggling!”

Warren took the photo down and apologized in the comments section on writer and speaker Sam Tsang’s blog. “Thanks so much for teaching us! It was removed instantly. May God bless you richly. Anytime you have guidance, you (or anyone else) can e-mail me directly,” Warren wrote in part.

Warren then posted photos announcing new Saddleback campuses, including one in Hong Kong, which upset Asian-American Christians who felt he needed to apologize more publicly.

Warren later posted an apology on Facebook, saying, “Staff handed me a hard copy of an e-mail from someone offended by a picture I posted. If you were hurt, upset, offended, or distressed by my insensitivity, I am truly sorry. May God richly bless you.”

It’s not the first time Asian Americans—about 13 percent of whom are evangelical, according to the Pew Research Center—have been upset by depictions from other Christians.

In 2009, the Christian publishing house Zondervan publicly apologized for publishing *Deadly Viper: A Kung Fu Survival Guide for Life and Leadership*, a book that uses illustrations depicting Chinese characters and images.

In 2004, LifeWay Christian Resources was criticized for its Asian-themed “Rickshaw Rally” Vacation Bible School curriculum, which some saw as racially insensitive. After the criticism, some changes were made in those materials, but the curriculum continued to be used.

“It is worth observing that it has almost been ten years since ‘Rickshaw Rally,’ and there are prominent American evangelical publishers, conferences, and pastors who still use Orientalizing imagery,” said Justin Tse, who is finishing a Ph.D. in geography at the University of British Columbia.

Author Helen Lee wonders whether the continued use of Asian imagery suggests that evangelicals are unable or unwilling to see their own cultural blind spots.

“How many times must we say the same thing before we are heard?” Lee said. “It is not acceptable to caricature Asian culture and to do so for quick laughs.” —Sarah Pulliam Bailey, RNS

Kenyans fear rise in Christian-Muslim conflict

While the smoke that hung over the Westgate Shopping Mall in Nairobi has dissipated, tension still lingers in the air.

The attack by al-Shabaab militants in September on a mall frequented by Westerners in Kenya's capital city left at least 67 dead. But the burning of a Christian church in the majority-Muslim city Mombasa just two weeks later suggests that the nation is on the precipice of more conflict between Christians and Muslims.

This is dispiriting for many in a country that for years enjoyed relative peace between the two monotheistic religions that dominate the region.

"I am afraid that now Muslims will attack more, and the Christians will arm themselves and fight back," said Paul Komu, a truck driver and Christian who was driving near Westgate when the attacks occurred.

Kenya is predominantly Christian, with Muslims making up about 11 percent of its population, mostly along the Somali border, its coastal region, and in cities such as Mombasa.

John L. Allen Jr., author of *The Global War on Christians*, wrote that just as Africa is the pacesetter for Christian and Muslim growth, it has also become one of the primary fronts for Christian-Muslim conflict—though not always in Kenya. For years, Kenya has been a refuge for people fleeing strife in other parts of the continent.

But Christian mission agencies such as the Mission Network report incidents of persecution pouring over the Kenyan border with Somalia. Mombasa is a flashpoint for conflict, and foreign militants and terror groups have wreaked havoc in the past—as was the case with the 1998 al-Qaeda bombing of the U.S. embassy in Nairobi.

To a large extent, day-to-day relations between the Muslims and Christians have been amicable.

Jamal Faroole, a Somali Muslim living in Nairobi, said, "For a long time we have had peace with Christians in this country."

David Ongwaye, a Lutheran pastor in



RELIGIOUS TENSION: A group prays at the International Lutheran Church of Nairobi, a city where Christians and Muslims fear escalating religious violence.

Kebirigo, Kenya, said that while there has been more political correctness than practical cooperation, "there was no thought that Muslims were plotting to cause mayhem."

Now, sentiments have shifted. "The human mind gets suspicious," said Faroole. "People were already suspicious of Somali Muslims, and now I fear it will only get worse."

Ongwaye mentioned the targeting of non-Muslims in the mall attack as particularly unsettling. During the siege, the attackers demanded that Muslims identify themselves and leave the scene.

"The incident at Westgate has, in my opinion, rendered Christians more vulnerable to the Muslims, and as such any future 'ecumenism' will be met with caution. It was very clear that those hostages who would recite the *shahada* were saved from the bullet," he said, referring to the Muslim profession of faith.

Newton Kahumbi Maina, an expert in Christian-Muslim relations at Kenyatta University, said competition for converts, education and politics have exacerbated and preserved a centuries-long conflict.

Notwithstanding history and the fact that suspicion and outright trepidation grip the country, the majority of Kenyans, on both sides, said they do not want to see escalating violence. Some even struck a hopeful tone.

Komu said he wants to see reconciliation. "Somali and Kenyan Muslims are still our cousins," he said. "Borders

can divide us, but we are still extended family."

Ongwaye, who said he was going to visit a Muslim friend on the coast, said that from his Christian perspective the mandate of Jesus to "love thy neighbor," which both Muslims and Christians can embrace, is more relevant than ever. —Ken Chitwood, RNS

Malay court says only Muslims may use 'Allah'

A court in Muslim-majority Malaysia has ruled that only Muslims are permitted to use the word *Allah* to describe God, overturning a lower court's 2009 decision that allowed others to use the word.

"The usage of the word *Allah* is not an integral part of the faith in Christianity," chief judge Mohamed Apandi Ali said October 14 in the ruling, supporting the government's case.

"The intended usage will cause unnecessary confusion within the Islamic community and is surely not conducive to the peaceful and harmonious tempo of life in the country," said Ali, according to the government-run Bernama news agency.

Allah is the Arabic word for God. Ali expressed the unanimous decision by the court's three Muslim judges. "The name 'Allah' does not appear, even once, in either the Old or New Testaments."

The ruling was aimed primarily at a Catholic newspaper, the *Herald*, which had been printing the word in its Malay-language stories to describe the Christian God, until the government deemed it was illegal in 2008.

When the *Herald* sued, a lower court ruled in favor of free speech in 2009 and allowed the paper to use the word.

That decision resulted in clashes between the two religions, including arson attacks against dozens of churches and a few mosques.

"It is a retrograde step in the development of law in relation to the fundamental liberty of religious minorities," the *Herald's* editor, Lawrence Andrew, said after losing the case. Andrew, an ordained priest, said he would appeal to Malaysia's highest court.

"Some Muslim groups have said that the Christian use of the word *Allah* could be used to encourage Muslims to convert to Christianity," the BBC reported.

Christians in Malaysia had used the word *Allah* for decades in churches and Malay-language Bibles, but the government decided a judicial ruling was needed to determine if the terminology should be legal.

Nonetheless, in the Middle East and in many other Muslim countries, Christians are not prohibited from using the word *Allah*. —Richard S. Ehrlich, RNS

Briefly Noted

■ The Episcopal Church began marrying same-sex couples in New Jersey after the state's supreme court on October 21 opened the door to same-gender weddings. The Garden State became the 14th state to allow such weddings. Episcopal Bishop Mark Beckwith of the Diocese of Newark told Episcopal News Service that he knew of many diocesan priests who were preparing to officiate at the ceremonies. "We are entering a new era in society and the life of the church," said the outgoing bishop, George Councell, of the Diocese of New Jersey, in a joint statement with the incoming Bishop William H. Stokes. "We have both publicly stated our support of this right for same-sex couples and rejoice at the

court's decision." Bishops in both dioceses told their clergy they should use the liturgy for same-sex blessings approved at the 2012 General Convention.

■ United Church of Christ leaders approved a \$25.3 million budget for 2014 but said the denomination still faces a \$2.3 million shortfall for the upcoming calendar year. That newly approved budget was lower than the \$27.5 million in expenditures in the current calendar year. The decisions and goal-setting came October 9–12 in the first combined meeting of the UCC board and the four national officers of the denomination—a long-sought streamlined organizational structure. "This is the first governing body of the United Church of Christ to see the whole picture," said Geoffrey A. Black, general minister and president. James Moos, executive minister of Wider Church Ministries, said it is not sustainable to make draws from reserve funds. If there is a silver lining now, said J. Bennett Guess, who oversees Local Church Ministries, it would be that "we have one decision-making process (instead of by separate ministries) that makes sense across the board." Guess, Black, Moos and M. Linda Jaramillo, who heads justice and witness ministries, make up the UCC's four-member Collegium.

■ The number of Hispanic Americans who say they adhere to no religion is growing and now rivals the number of Hispanic evangelicals, a study has found. The share of Hispanics living in the U.S. who say they are atheist, agnostic or have no religious affiliation has reached 12 percent, according to the 2013 Hispanic Values Survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute. That is double the rate reported in 1990 by the American Religious Identification Survey. Researchers say Hispanic "nones" are now statistically equal to the number of U.S. Hispanic evangelical Protestants—13 percent. They suggest this indicates a religious divide in the Hispanic community that will be felt for decades to come. The study found 80 percent of Hispanic nones favor same-sex marriage, while only 21 percent of evangelical Hispanics do.

People

■ Suzan Johnson Cook, the State Department's ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, is resigning after 17 months on the job, according to two sources familiar with her office. President Obama nominated the former Baptist minister to serve as his top adviser on protecting religious freedom around the world. When confirmed by the Senate in April 2011, she became the first woman and the first African American in the position, which had been held by two people before her. Obama had been criticized for taking too much time after his own swearing-in to nominate a religious freedom ambassador, a position created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. He first nominated Cook in June 2010, but her nomination expired in January 2011, and Obama was forced to renominate her several weeks later. Obama was criticized for choosing Cook, in part for her scant diplomatic experience. But she had a track record as a high-level counselor. She advised President Bill Clinton as a White House fellow on the Domestic Policy Council.

■ The Council on American-Islamic Relations has hired a Jewish filmmaker and interfaith activist as executive director of the advocacy group's Philadelphia office. **Jacob Bender** is the highest ranking non-Muslim in the Washington-based organization, and the first to lead one of its chapters. "Many Muslims face daily suspicion, not unlike other immigrant groups throughout history," said Bender, explaining that he felt people had a responsibility to confront bigotry. "When one group of Americans is attacked, it lessens the quality of democracy for all of us." Bender acknowledged the job will be challenging. "As part of a community that has historically faced persecution in Europe and the United States as well, I hope that I would bring a certain amount of sensitivity." During the last few years, Bender directed and produced a documentary film, *Out of Cordoba*, which explores Muslim-Jewish relations and the "clash of civilizations" theory through the writings of two medieval thinkers, Averroes, a Muslim, and his Jewish counterpart, Moses Maimonides.

LIVING BY The Word

Sunday, November 17

Isaiah 65:17–25; 2 Thessalonians 3:6–13; Luke 21:5–19

IN ELEVATED, beautiful language God promises to create new heavens and a new earth. The problems and pain, the injustice and hunger, the longing and the loneliness—all will be vanquished! This image of predators and prey happily coexisting will appear again in the Isaiah text for Advent 2, and in Advent 3's Isaiah passage there will be “no lion . . . nor ravenous beast” in God's renewed Zion. But this week we have both: the reconciliation of predators and prey, and the vanquishing of the serpent (often the biblical archetype for the Evil Other).

This pastoral scene of predator and prey nuzzling one another is impossibly idyllic. It's as if we're watching a YouTube clip of animals doing preposterous cute things. We are fascinated and dismissive all at once. Our expectations, and even the laws of nature, are upended. Isn't this a scene that belongs in fairy tales or some “over the rainbow” land? Predator politics, predator institutions, predator bosses, family members, friends, strangers—what place does Isaiah's idyllic image of God's promise for us have in our real world?

I like Edward Hicks's depiction of Isaiah's vision in his painting *The Peaceable Kingdom*. A Quaker minister and artist, Hicks painted animals and children throughout his life. He also mixed in images of Quakers and Native Americans meeting together peacefully. But after the great American Quaker schism of 1827, Hicks's images were crowded with less peace and included more menacing fangs. Now he was beginning to paint reality, right?

One way of interpreting this text is to recognize the precarious powers (and potential for peace) that we all carry. Tending to our inner warfare—to the power-hungry lions within us that tear into our insecure inner lambs—is hard work, but in this way we join God in imagining our worlds, both inner and outer, both present and future, into hopeful reconciliation.

Pulling back the lens on this text, we face the larger question of God promising a reconciliation of all creatures. Questions immediately arise. *When* will God's new kingdom come, we ask? Just check the news, we add—justice is not yet reigning. The people of God have already been waiting a long time, so is this prophecy an airy-fairy spiritual fantasy? Or if indeed God has a utopia in the works, why are we bothering to sweat and fret about anything?

Amidst problems of eschatology and dispensationalism, one gem to mine from Isaiah's articulation of God's promise has to do with the question of when. When will God create a new earth? In a couple of weeks? Years? Generations?

In the Hebrew, the ambiguity of verb tense has prompted a wide variation in translations: God will create, God creates, God is creating, God is about to create new heavens and a new earth. This is a moment when the original language offers us a fresh view. The timing of God's new creation is *ambiguous*, a word that comes from the Latin *ambo* meaning “both.” God's new creation is happening both now and in the future.

Albert Einstein talked about the fluidity of “now” and “then.” “The only reason for time is so that everything doesn't happen at once.” If our God is unlimited by time, then perhaps this isn't just an intellectual somersault. Perhaps it matters very much that God's promise is both now and not now, already and not yet.

If it is true that each preacher has only one or two sermons, then perhaps mine is “both now and not now”: the Christian task of bearing paradox. God is in us and not in us. Three and one. Human and divine. Holding opposite truths in tension with one another, rather than accepting one and rejecting the other, is one of the highest spiritual disciplines we ever face.

The paradox in God's lofty promise in Isaiah is that all *will* be resolved, and that all *is* resolved. The good news is that this frees us: we are not prisoners of our circumstances. The world is and shall be bigger than all the limitations we encounter in ourselves, in others and in the material universe of gravity, violence, aging, suffering and injustice.

There is only one command from God in this passage. “But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating.” I love the echo in the Westminster Creed, which declares the chief end of humanity is “to glorify God and to enjoy [God] forever.” When I heard these words in confirmation class, I objected. “Wait,” I said, “the chief end is to follow the commandments and the Golden Rule, to be like Jesus!” My confirmation mentor smiled and waited for me to get it. “Oooh,” I realized, “all those things *are* glorifying God.”

Because we cannot control the future we fear it. We want to predict, control, explain and order it. What will happen to the addict daughter, the default mortgage, the shaky career, the Middle East, the Earth's ozone and all of the most vulnerable bits of God's creation? Living in the moment is a continual spiritual struggle. We spend too much time fretting about something in the past or scrambling to plan (control) the future. I sometimes recall a favorite 12-step acronym in these moments: “F.E.A.R. is Forgetting Everything's All Right.”

Better yet, we can turn to Isaiah's words and be reminded that we are not God, and that God is bringing about more grace and goodness than we can imagine. In seeking nevertheless to imagine and to insist on God's intention for a just world, we participate in it, which may be the best news of all.

Reflections on the lectionary

Sunday, November 24

Jeremiah 23:1–6; Colossians 1:11–20; Luke 23:33–43

ON CHRIST THE KING Sunday it seems pastorally heavy to drag ourselves to the foot of the cross. On the other hand, maybe it's exactly the right move.

Luke makes certain that we don't miss the double death dealt in the moment when human power shows its worst side. Not only is Jesus executed; he is humiliated. The leaders scoff, the soldiers mock, a criminal derides. It's as if the collective murdering machine is making sure to communicate that "we're not killing Jesus because he's powerful, we're killing Jesus because he's a Nothing who is pretending to be powerful."

We 21st-century people don't think of these powers, however, when we hear "Christ the King," because our ears have become dull and desensitized to this title. Royals don't rule us; we no longer use this term. Yet it's crucial that we remember that the first-century in Galilee was a time of kings and rulers, as well as a time of huge social change and upheaval. The roots of our faith are located here, not in isolated issues of individual piety, but rather in resistance to the idolatry of power—specifically, the Roman Empire and Herodian Jerusalem.

Idolatry of power might be the easiest sin to illustrate, since a preacher can point to Judas as an ideal and relatable example. Judas's betrayal of Jesus came with an idol-

izing of power. Judas saw in Jesus a long-awaited Messiah who would clean up the politically perverted mess that the nation of Israel had become, but then he realized that Jesus was not going to wave a sword and effect change by any means necessary. Judas's disappointment grew because he could not conceive of kingship in any manner that did not involve might and violence.

The mocking and daring at the cross followed this same theme: "Are you a king, or aren't you? If you are, then do something king-like!" So taunted one criminal, in a display of petty tyranny. Most of us can point to some time in our lives when wrenching pain or moments of despicable evil found us wringing our hands and beseeching God, "If you're really God, then please . . . !" We have all been the first criminal.

Similarly, we have all been the second criminal, the one who recognized Jesus' power. Scolding the first criminal, this one said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." We seek to have the eyes and heart of the second criminal and to not fail to see Jesus when he is manifest before us.

Which brings us back to the question of power: How are we to think of Christ? As an alternative king? A model emperor?

As our heavenly ruler, the one who matters in a material world that does not? It's confusing, since we are part of a church that has, since the fourth century, connected and mirrored ecclesiastical structure with earthly empire structure. As cathedrals were built, the power of the state grew as well and became intertwined with the power of the church triumphant.

In Colossians 1, Paul makes an audacious attempt to sort out the powers of the universe. "For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him" (v. 16). Walter Wink helps us here. Rather than sorting heavenly from earthly and spiritual from material, Wink insists that the powers have their being only because of God in Christ and exist to serve the purpose of the whole creation as it comes to its focus in him.

In other words, whatever we mean for evil, including our earthly distortions of power, God means for good. Our best bet is to steward power as faithfully as we can, aligning our decisions with our theology. This is easier said than done, but we make great strides in our faith if we can, together and individually, grow in our awareness of to what and to whom we give

Earthly powers exist to serve Christ and creation.

our power. To whom do we give the power to tell us who we are? Who has the power to tell us whether or not we are valuable or successful? Who or what has the power to shape our moods and our minds, influence our decisions, tell us whether we are safe or unsafe, and help us discern what is important and what is not? How might we act more as if we know that, through God, Jesus Christ is the Power of Powers?

Perhaps there is no better time to consider our personal distortions of power than the Sunday before Thanksgiving. For most of us, comparing Golgotha with our family dinner table is probably a stretch. Or maybe not. Our families can offer us glimpses of the face of God, but they also give us glimpses of human beings at their worst.

Luke tells us that Jesus accompanies us, and even asks forgiveness on our behalf, amidst relational violence and brokenness of all sorts. Jesus exhibits capacities fit only for a King of kings.

The author is Katie Givens Kime, a minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Messy stories

by Ellen Painter Dollar

IN THE WEE HOURS of a late August morning, I sat exhausted but wide awake beside the bed of my two-and-a-half-year-old daughter. A pink fiberglass cast stretched from Leah's chest down her entire left leg and partway down the right. The previous afternoon she had broken her left femur. Her thigh bone split in two and nearly end to end when she slipped on a book left lying on the floor.

After a harrowing trip to the emergency room, during which her thigh swelled to twice its size, a team of men in scrubs sedated her and then straightened and wrapped her broken leg.

Leah had broken some bones before—a couple of broken tibias (shinbones) and a broken arm. But I knew from experience that a femur fracture is a different kind of break—more painful and more disabling.

It was dark when we finally got home from the emergency room. After filling her with pizza, narcotics and sedatives, my husband and I settled her down to sleep. But every time she began to relax, the traumatized muscles surrounding her broken bone seized, causing jolts of pain that woke her up. Her pitiful, weary cries chipped away at the remains of my composure. Finally, another dose of sedatives allowed her to drift into oblivion. I was left to ponder what we had gotten ourselves into with this beautiful child.

We brought Leah into the world knowing that she had a 50 percent chance of inheriting my bone disorder, osteogenesis imperfecta, a collagen defect that led me to have three dozen broken bones before my 11th birthday, along with nearly a dozen surgeries and uncounted disappointments and humiliations. We hoped Leah wouldn't inherit OI but suspected that she had even before the lab test confirmed it when she was six weeks old. Our hearts broke every time she was sidelined with another broken bone, every time circumstances made it starkly clear that our fragile girl could not inhabit the world as safely as her peers could.

As we learned how to be parents to Leah, we were haunted by the question of whether we could take the chance of having another child. That question roared back to life as I sat next to Leah after her femur fractured. Given what we all had gone through, the answer seemed clear: no.

I could not watch another child break bones after insignificant falls and be unable to join in the most routine toddler play because she was too unsteady and fragile. Or rather, I could do it—here I was doing it—but I didn't want to do it. I wanted a

sturdy baby, one who could slip on a book and not end up in the emergency room.

When Leah broke her femur, I was about ready to start a program of in vitro fertilization (IVF). Conceiving our second child via IVF would allow us to undergo preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD). All our fertilized eggs would be tested for the mutation that causes OI. If I became pregnant, we would know without a doubt that the baby would not have OI.

As I stroked Leah's sweaty hair that night, that guarantee seemed more potent and necessary than ever. Preventing OI seemed an obvious good.

But that clarity was short-lived. My theological, ethical, practical and cultural questions about genetic screening and assisted reproduction continued to haunt me, as did questions about the Christian understanding of disability, suffering and what makes for a good life.

In his book *Far from the Tree*, Andrew Solomon says that stories about genetic conditions tend to reflect one of two primary narratives: either the illness narrative or the identity narrative.

In the illness narrative, disabilities are seen as problems in need of solving, abnormalities that will surely bring great suffering to those affected and their families. In the identity narrative, anomalous conditions such as Down syndrome, autism or deafness are regarded not as flaws but as valuable manifestations of human diversity. The so-called abnormal conditions are disabling primarily because of societal prejudice, ignorance and exclusion, not because of inherent qualities of the conditions themselves.

I find both narratives incomplete, oversimplified and even dangerous when one is embraced to the exclusion of the other. (Solomon also argues that neither narrative tells the whole story.)

Our medical system and our popular culture tend to assume the illness narrative. Cure is the happy ending, and technologies such as PGD that prevent babies with genetic conditions from being born in the first place are the next best thing. The illness narrative says that a baby who is not perfectly healthy is an avoidable tragedy. When I look at our curly-headed girl—talkative, bright, beautiful—I know that the illness narrative is inadequate. To call her life a tragedy is insane.



But it is equally insane to view the challenges of OI as simply one of the many limitations that people face in life. Even if the world were utterly accepting of and accessible to people with OI, the broken bones, surgeries and severe arthritis that afflict people with OI—all of that hurts. A lot. Little girls should not break their femurs just by slipping on a book. These realities are not a challenge to be overcome; they are terrible wounds that cry out for healing, not mere hospitality.

My daughter's disability has contributed to her being the wise young woman she is.

Leah is now nearing 14, and every day with her I have lived with a paradox: I love her just as she is. I love her grace and groundedness. I know that having OI has contributed to her being the wise young woman that she is. And I love my own life. I know that OI has shaped me as a writer, wife, mother and Christian. Yet I still hate how Leah and I have suffered. I long for a cure. If I had a magic wand that could wave OI away, I would use it in heartbeat.

The distinction between illness and identity narratives of disability is useful for understanding cultural debates about disabilities, but neither narrative adequately describes my experience. People's stories are marked by paradox and complexity. They are messy. We will not have fruitful conversations about disabilities, reproduction, screening and choice until we

learn to make such stories the starting point of conversation. We need true and messy stories, not morality tales.

Many people living with disabilities rightly challenge the predominant illness narrative that assumes the inherent goodness of preembryonic and prenatal screening for genetic anomalies. Some people living with genetic conditions see the new genetics as a threat to our very existence—an attempt to annihilate us. Informal rules have cropped up concerning which stories are and are not welcomed into the conversation.

Amy Julia Becker, who writes frequently about having a daughter with Down syndrome, found this out last year when she published a series of stories on her Patheos blog about people's experiences with prenatal diagnosis. She included the story of a woman who chose to abort a fetus diagnosed with Down syndrome. Becker told me that she received private correspondence from advocates for people with Down syndrome who said her decision to post the story undercut her primary goal of encouraging grace-filled hospitality for people with Down syndrome. Yet 75 to 80 percent of women who receive a prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome choose termination. So the most common story is, in the eyes of some advocates on this issue, the very story that should not be told.

Becker also notes that she and other parents of children with Down syndrome hesitate to talk about the hard moments they have with their children. To admit that they sometimes struggle to parent a child with Down syndrome and worry

Ellen Painter Dollar blogs at Patheos and is author of No Easy Choice: A Story of Disability, Parenthood, and Faith in an Age of Advanced Reproduction.

about the child's future can feel like a betrayal, a form of caving in to the narrative that says children with Down syndrome live tragic lives and that everyone would therefore be better off if such children were not born.

Becker notes that she doesn't hesitate to talk about the hard moments in parenting her son who does not have Down syndrome. She doesn't worry that someone hearing that story will say, "See? Little boys are so difficult. People should terminate pregnancies with little boys so they won't have to deal with all this hard stuff."

A friend who has a daughter with Down syndrome frequently shares with community groups her recollection of the day her daughter was born. She describes how she sat in her hospital room thinking, "I don't want this baby. I don't know how to handle this baby." The mother of a child with Down syndrome scolded her for telling this story instead of focusing on the positive aspects of raising her child.

People's stories are full of paradox and contradiction, and people are too often silenced or ostracized for fear their stories will provide fodder for the "opposing side" in the debates over disability, illness, suffering and the promises and pitfalls of medical, reproductive and genetic technologies.

The preference for simplistic narratives is apparent in our tendency to cast stories as morality tales. In an online post for the journal *First Things*, Philip C. Burcham told a compelling story of his family's history with OI in which he referred to a

doctor as a "eugenicist." The doctor had assumed that Burcham and his wife, whose first child inherited OI from Burcham, would want to do everything in their power to avoid having "another one of those."

The doctor's unquestioned acceptance of the prevailing illness narrative, in which the sole desirable goal of any pregnancy is the birth of a child without any genetic abnormalities, deserved Burcham's criticism. But there is no evidence that the doctor was guilty of eugenics, which is a philosophy and sociopolitical movement that supports selective breeding for the "improvement" of the human race. By labeling this physi-

People's stories are not simple morality tales.

cian a eugenicist (a term associated with horrific policies in Nazi Germany and elsewhere), Burcham moves from telling his family's story to preaching a morality tale. The misguided doctor becomes a villain, rather than a flawed human being who thought he was doing the right thing even if he wasn't.

The temptation to reduce complex human stories to simple morality tales has emerged in people's responses to my own story. My husband and I ultimately abandoned PGD and had another baby naturally. When people learn this fact, they want to transform our story into a shiny morality tale in which we "saw the light" and the error of our eugenic ways and left PGD behind for the more loving decision to accept whatever naturally conceived child we got.

Our choice wasn't that simple, though. Such choices rarely are. A few days after Leah fractured her femur, we started an IVF cycle, with its attendant injections, ultrasounds, blood tests, stress and expense. Of four fertilized eggs, only one tested negative for OI. That fertilized egg was put back into my uterus, but a pregnancy test two weeks later was negative. We planned to try again.

Then we got distracted by Leah getting her cast off and starting preschool, by buying a new house and by wondering where we'd get the money for another cycle of IVF. We continued to ask ourselves questions about what makes for a fulfilling life, parents' duties to children and how today's overwrought parenting culture skews and distorts those duties. Those questions haunted me—but they didn't quite convince me to pick up the phone to tell the fertility clinic that we were done with PGD and IVF.

Pondering those questions did, however, make it easier to embrace, with grati-

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tude and some trepidation, the pregnancy that occurred naturally before we got a chance to return to the clinic.

Yes, we abandoned PGD and went on to have two more children conceived naturally, neither of whom inherited OI. But it was not because we clearly saw the light about anything.

Christian scriptures are a treasure trove of messy, complicated human stories. We should know better than to cheapen our own stories by recasting them as morality tales, with radiant shafts of light revealing good and bad, right and wrong, hero and villain.

In the Bible, the heroes are flawed and the good guys don't always win. Even stories in which there is a clear message for how to live in the world and with each other are full of complexities and contradictions.

We rejoice at the father's ecstatic embrace of the Prodigal Son—and we feel a little miffed on behalf of the responsible other son. We are in awe of the creator God's rebuke of Job—and we think that Job had good reason to complain to God (and suspect we would do the same thing). We understand why Jesus said that Mary was doing the better thing—and we wish she and Jesus had just gotten up and helped Martha with the meal. Our scripture also reminds us that we see as in a mirror, dimly. Any story that fails to acknowledge that dimness, that murkiness, is a story I have difficulty trusting.

True stories, like biblical stories, are multifaceted. This complexity is inherent in a narrative approach and is what makes the narrative approach so useful. Although naming and accepting the tensions, messiness and complexity of stories is difficult, this type of storytelling leads to compassion, wisdom and ultimately conversion—the choice to risk a new way of seeing the world, ourselves and others and new ways of living in the world and with each other. Stories help us seek a better way while understanding that there is rarely anything so clear as the best way.

Stories honestly told, with all their murkiness intact, point the listener and

the storyteller to something larger than themselves. Research shows that children who hear and retell strong family narratives—who know their families' stories—are more resilient because they know they belong to something larger than themselves. When we tell and listen to difficult, multifaceted stories, it becomes harder and harder to make black-and-white declarations of what is right and wrong. This lack of clarity in turn forces us to look outside of ourselves for guidance—to scripture, to our communities, to our traditions, to the wisdom of others who have grappled with similar questions.

Thus, contrary to the popular notion that narrative (story-focused) ethics promotes relativism, whereby every person seeks his or her own truth based on his or her circumstances, this process actually leads us to seek wisdom from outside of our limited vision. Venturing into the messy landscape of story provides a lesson in humility, reminding us that we have much to learn from both our own stories and the stories of others.

If a primary goal of advocacy for those with disabilities is to insist that society see us as fully human, let's start by allowing people to tell true stories that bear the marks of that humanity—tension, paradox, regret, pain and grief as well as joy, success, happiness, love and accomplishment.

When I talk about our decisions in regard to using reproductive technology, I still don't know whether the decisions we made were right or wrong. I do know, however, that I need to keep telling my story and inviting others to tell theirs. CC

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After injustice

by Nicholas Wolterstorff

JUSTICE AND LOVE are of course connected, as are justice and forgiveness. Forgiveness is a manifestation of the love that scripture attributes to God and that Jesus enjoins on us. Anders Nygren went further and held that we should think of all love on the model of God's forgiveness of the sinner. That goes too far. But there can be no doubt that love manifested in forgiveness is a fundamental component of the Christian vision.

Everyone would agree that forgiveness cannot be dispensed indiscriminately hither and yon. Forgiveness presupposes that someone has wronged someone, deprived the person of something to which the person had a right; it presupposes that an injustice has occurred. It furthermore presupposes that the one doing the forgiving recognizes that someone has been wronged, recognizes that an injustice has occurred.

Let me present my understanding of the nature of forgiveness in two stages. First I will describe the context required if forgiveness is to occur. Then I will say what forgiveness does within that context. Let me introduce a fictional character and call him "Hubert."

The context in which my forgiveness of Hubert can occur has five essential components: (1) Hubert did wrong me, (2) I rightly believe that he was blamable for doing so, (3) I feel resentment or some similar negative emotion at the deed done, (4) I feel anger or some similar negative emotion at Hubert for having done it, and (5) I continue to remember the deed and who did it and continue to condemn it. Only when these conditions are met is it possible for me to forgive Hubert for the wrong he did me.

I said that everyone would agree that the first of these is a necessary condition of my forgiving Hubert. Let me briefly explain why the others are as well.

I can forgive Hubert for his wronging of me only if I rightly believe that he was blamable, culpable, for what he did. If I believe that he was not culpable because he acted under duress, out of nonculpable ignorance or out of ineradicable weakness of will, I do not blame him and hence do not forgive him. I excuse him. Excusing resembles forgiving, but it is nonetheless not only distinct from forgiving but also forestalls forgiving. If I excuse you, forgiveness is out of the picture.

Second, it's possible to believe that one has been wronged by someone without experiencing any negative emotion toward either deed or doer. One might dismiss act and agent as beneath one's attention. "I can't be bothered with insults from scum like you." Such emotionless dismissal is not forgiveness; and it too forestalls forgiveness. It does not treat the deed and

its doer with moral seriousness. Forgiveness can occur only when the deed and its doer are treated with moral seriousness.

Third, if I am to forgive Hubert for the wrong he did me, I must continue to remember what was done to me, I must continue to remember that it was Hubert who did it, and I must continue to condemn what he did. Forgetting what was done to me, or forgetting that Hubert did it, whether because I actively put the memory out of mind or because it just gradually fades away, resembles forgiveness. But forgetting is not forgiving; it too forestalls forgiving. If one has forgotten what was done to one or forgotten who did it, forgiving the person for what the person did is out of the picture. Forgiveness is not to be identified with letting bygones be bygones.

Forgiveness is neither forgetting nor excusing.

So what is it to forgive Hubert for the wrong he did me? I suggest that it is to enact the resolution no longer to hold against him what he did to me, no longer to count it against him. My full enactment of the resolution may take a long time; it may, in fact, never be completed. Forgiveness is often hard work. And the resolution itself may be partial: I may resolve not to hold it against him in some ways and resolve to continue to hold it against him in other ways.

And what is it for me no longer to hold against Hubert what he did to me, no longer to count it against him? He did it, after all; I remember that he did, and I continue to condemn it. I have neither forgotten what he did nor have I excused him for doing it.

To explain what I think it is, let me distinguish between what I will call a person's personal history and what I will call his (or her) moral history. Someone's personal history is the ensemble of all the things he did. His moral history is a subset within his personal history. It consists of that ensemble of things he did that contribute to determining

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in what respects and to what degree he is a morally good person, and in what respects and to what degree he is morally bad.

The point of introducing the idea of a person's moral history is that we need not, and do not, treat everything a person does as part of his moral history. If Hubert wronged me but it turns out that he's not morally blamable because he acted out of nonculpable ignorance, then, rather than thinking worse of him for what he did to me, I excuse him. To excuse him is to declare that the deed is not part of his moral history. It is part of his personal history; he did do it. But it's not part of his moral history; it does not put a blot on his moral condition.

I suggest that for me not to hold against Hubert the wrong he did to me is for me, in my personal engagement with him, to treat him as if that deed did not belong to his moral history. It is in fact part of his moral history, and I don't forget that it is; I both remember what he did and continue to condemn it. But I now act on the resolution to treat him as I would if I did not believe that it was part of his moral history. I treat him as I would if I excused him—except that I continue to believe that he is blamable.

Assuming that this is what forgiveness is, why forgive? Why not continue to hold against Hubert the wrong he did to me? Why not resolve that the dastardly thing he did shall forever determine how I interact with him?

Well, suppose that Hubert has repented of what he did to me. He remains culpable for having done it; nothing can change that. But he has altered his relation to what he did in a morally significant way. Rather than standing behind what he did to me, he now places himself at a moral distance from it. He now joins me in condemning what he did. His overall moral condition is now significantly different from what it was before. And not only different; in an important respect, it is better. Hubert's repentance, assuming I know about it, is an invitation for me to forgive him.

His repentance is no more than an invitation, however; my forgiveness may not be forthcoming. As we all know, some people reject the invitation that repentance offers. They refuse to forgive the wrongdoer, even if he has repented of what he did and they know he has.

Suppose, however, that I accept the invitation that Hubert's repentance offers me. I forgive him. Presumably I do so because I expect or hope that thereby some good will come about. What might that good be?

Often we forgive the repentant

wrongdoer in the hope or expectation that reconciliation will ensue. Reconciliation is the good we expect or hope that forgiveness in response to repentance will bring about.

Perhaps there is something more that we hope for, or should hope for. I have in mind a comment by the philosopher Jean Hampton (in her essay "Forgiveness, Resentment, and Hatred" in *Forgiveness and Mercy*, edited by Jeffrie Murphy and Jean Hampton). After observing that forgiveness "makes possible the benefits that come from a renewed relationship," she goes on to say the following:

It also liberates the victim and the wrongdoer from the effects of the immoral action itself. The forgiver is no longer trapped in the position of the victim defending herself, and the wrongdoer is no longer in the position of the sinner, stained by sin and indebted to his victim. But perhaps the greatest good forgiveness can bring is the liberation of the wrongdoer from the effects of the victim's moral hatred. If the wrongdoer fears that the victim is right to see him as cloaked in evil, or as infected with moral sin, these fears can engender moral hatred of himself.

These seem to me wise and perceptive words.

The explanation of forgiveness that I have offered is an explanation of what the theological and philosophical tradi-



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tions call forgiveness. In the modern therapeutic tradition, something quite different is called forgiveness.

Forgiveness, as I have described it, is an engagement with the wrongdoer; one engages the person as if what the person did does not belong to his or her moral history. The pair, forgiveness and repentance together, is a two-way engagement. What is called forgiveness in the modern therapeutic tradition is not an engagement with the wrongdoer. It's the process of getting over one's emotions of anger at the wrongdoer and resentment at the deed done so that they no longer "eat away" at one—no longer impair one's well-being. Getting over these emotions is typically recommended on the ground that doing so enables one to "get on with things"; it is also often recommended on the ground that unless one gets over one's anger and resentment, the wrongdoer continues to have emotional control over one. Both one's well-being and one's autonomy are enhanced by getting over one's anger. Forgiveness, so understood, is a purely interior undertaking. It does not aim at reconciliation between wrongdoer and victim; it aims at getting one's own emotional house in order. Sometimes, let me be clear, this is the best one can do; but it's a second best.

Back to what is called forgiveness in the theological and philosophical traditions. I described repentance as an invitation to forgive. A question that Christians often ask is whether they—and perhaps others as well—should forgive even in the absence of repentance. What Jesus said on the cross is commonly cited in support of the claim that we should. Referring to those who were crucifying him, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

As I observed earlier, if someone wrongs somebody but doesn't know that she did (and couldn't be expected to have known), we don't blame her for what she did but excuse her. And if we excuse her rather than blame her, forgiveness is not in the picture. One can forgive someone for what she did only if one thinks she is blamable.

The Greek word that is translated into English as *forgive* in

Luke 23:34 is an imperative form of the verb *aphiemi*. My Greek-English lexicon tells me that the root meaning of the term is "let go, send away." In some contexts the term does undoubtedly mean forgive. But given that Jesus says that his crucifiers don't know what they are doing, what he is asking of the Father is not that he forgive them but that he excuse them—not hold it against them.

Luke reports Jesus as saying, on one occasion, "If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive" (Luke 17:3–4 NRSV).

In Matthew's narrative, Peter seems to have found this quite incredible. To check it out he asks, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus' response is hyperbolic: "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times" (Matt. 18:21–22 NRSV).

Is it possible or even permissible to forgive an unrepentant wrongdoer?

Nowhere in the New Testament is Jesus reported as enjoining his listeners to forgive unrepentant wrongdoers. We are instructed to love our enemies, including those who have wronged us and are unrepentant. We are not instructed to forgive our enemies. Neither do I know of any passage in the New Testament that says that God forgives (justifies) even unrepentant wrongdoers. Here is what the Kairos Document, issued in South Africa in 1986 by theologians opposed to apartheid, says on the matter:

The Biblical teaching on reconciliation and forgiveness makes it quite clear that nobody can be forgiven and reconciled with God unless she or he repents of their sins. Nor are we expected to forgive the unrepentant sinner. When he or she repents we must be willing to forgive seventy times seven times, but before that we are expected to preach repentance to those who sin against us or against anyone. Reconciliation, forgiveness and negotiations will become our Christian duty in South Africa only when the apartheid regime shows signs of genuine repentance.

A further question is whether it is even possible to forgive the unrepentant wrongdoer—and if it is possible, whether it is morally permissible. Suppose that Hubert stands behind what he did to me; he insists that he did me no wrong. Can I nonetheless form and act on the resolution to forgive him, not hold it against him in my future engagements with him? I can certainly be willing to forgive him in case he repents. But can I forgive?

Possibly; I'm not sure. But I question whether I should. Not to hold it against him in the absence of any repentance on his part is to fail to take with full moral seriousness either the wrongness of the deed, my own worth or Hubert's worth as a moral agent.

May the word run swiftly

2 Thessalonians 3:1

Like the invisible coyotes that streak through the woods to the fringes of our town, a bawling wind of voices. They've come too close, the village complains. Perhaps. I've heard the squeals of chipmunks caught in the fur-fire. People plug their ears, follow their dogs out at night. But still, I open my window to their shrill, persistent haunting, fall asleep to the blessed assurance of a pulsing, moon-ticked pack loping over the fallen leaves in the darkness, working together for some kind of good.

Tania Runyan

Consider the situation. Hubert agrees with me that what he did should be counted as belonging to his moral history; but he insists, over my objections, that what he did was not wrong but was in fact a good thing. Now I say to him, “We agree that you are responsible for what you did to me; but you don’t see anything wrong in it. I do. What you did to me was wrong. But I have resolved not to hold it against you. I forgive you. I have resolved henceforth to treat you as I would if I excused you.”

I submit that this is both to demean myself and to insult Hubert by refusing to treat him and what he did with full moral seriousness. “Keep your forgiveness,” he snaps, “I did nothing wrong.” Better to join with Hubert in counting the deed as part of his moral history and go on to insist, against his protests, that it was wrong.

Richard Swinburne makes the point well. Unless the wrongdoing was trivial, he writes in *Responsibility and Atonement*, it is wrong for the victim “in the absence of some atonement at least in the form of apology to treat the [act] as not having been done.” If I have murdered your wife and you decide to overlook my offense and interact with me as if it had never happened, your attitude “trivializes human life, your love for your wife, and the importance of right action. And it involves your failing to treat me seriously, to take seriously my attitude towards you expressed in my action. Thereby it trivializes human relationships, for it supposes that good human relations can exist when we do not take each other seriously.”

Let me close with some reflections on the relation of forgiveness to punishment. Suppose that Hubert has repented of what he did to me, that I know that he has and that I am working at forgiving him. Though I believe that Hubert has genuinely repented of this particular act, I might also believe that he still has “demons” inside him that make it likely that he will do the same sort of thing again, if not to me, then to someone else.

In that case I might support the imposition of hard treatment on him of a sort that is likely to reform him—treatment that is likely to induce in him a character reformation. I might also think that, until this reformation has taken place, the public needs to be protected from him. And I might think that if our system for deterring such behavior is to work, it has to be imposed impartially; it won’t work effectively and fairly if we allow those who impress us with their penitence to avoid sanctions. In short, I might be convinced that hard treatment of the appropriate sort should be imposed on Hubert for reformation, for protection or for deterrence.

But as I noted earlier, none of these reasons for imposing one or another sort of hard treatment on someone is punishment, strictly speaking. They all point forward to some good to be achieved in the future, whereas punishment looks back to some wrong that has been done. To punish is to impose hard treatment on someone for the wrong the person did in the past.

So suppose that Hubert is thoroughly penitent and that I forgive him. I act on the resolution not to hold against him what he did to me; I interact with him as if he had not done it. Do I then forego imposing or supporting the imposition of punishment on him—reprobative punishment? In reprobative punishment, the imposition of hard treatment counts as firmly condemning what was done.

If I no longer hold against Hubert what he did to me, if I fully and completely forgive him, then I will not myself impose hard treatment on him as a way of firmly condemning him for what he did, nor will I be in favor of the state or any other institution doing so. To condemn him in this way, or to support his being condemned, amounts to counting against him what he did.

This raises the question, however, whether there may not be some cases in which it would be inappropriate, perhaps even wrong, to forego punishment of the wrongdoer even if he is penitent—inappropriate or wrong to forego firmly expressing condemnation of what he did. Yes, he now joins me in condemning what he did. But may it be that what he did was so bad that verbal condemnation is inadequate? May it be that some stronger form of condemnation is needed?

I think so. In many ways, one will forgive him. But one will not think it right to forego punishing him nor to forego supporting his being punished. One’s forgiveness, in that way, does and should remain incomplete.

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What's in a religious identity?

Being and doing

by Jon M. Sweeney

WHEN PASSOVER comes around, I sometimes remark to friends that I must be the only Christian in the world who participates in three or four seders a year. Even active Jews don't usually attend that many. Why would they, after all, unless they're leading them, as my wife, a rabbi, often does. I am usually sitting beside her. I am there looking after our toddler, but also as something of a rebbetzman.

Rebbetzin is the name often given to the rabbi's wife in traditional Jewish communities. It is a transliterated Yiddish word roughly equivalent to "rebbe's female," like "pastor's wife" in some Christian traditions. In progressive communities like ours, *rebbetzman* is used as a tongue-in-cheek equivalent to describe guys like me. Not that most rebbetzmen are guys; they certainly aren't.

When I'm at a seder or shul, however, I am gathering together with my primary congregation—even though I'm not Jewish. I attend not only because I am a rebbetzman but because I find it meaningful. Many religious traditions mark God's activity in the world as something akin to freeing slaves, and Judaism does this memorably.

One particular seder was a turning point for my self-understanding. We were sitting around the table with friends. Michal was leading the seder, and I was participating while also trying to keep our daughter happy. Around the table were people that we knew well and others we'd just met. Michal and I were fresh off a painful experience where she hadn't gotten a leadership position because she was married to me—a Catholic.

It is common at a seder for participants to ask questions; there are four in the formal liturgy. But Jews are great at asking questions, and the seder is an occasion when questions big and small are encouraged. Just as we were all seated, getting ready to begin, one of the men around the table said to the rest of us: "I have a question. I notice that we are all interfaith couples around this table, that we are all Jewish-Christian."

Everyone took another look at their neighbors and realized that he'd hit on something.

"So, I'm wondering," he resumed, "you Christians who are here, why are you? I mean, I'm Jewish and I know why I'm here; I know what I get out of these things. But what do you get out of this? What brings you here?"

The first person to speak was a middle-aged woman sitting to my left, who is married to another woman. She gave the perfect progressive answer: "As you may know, this week is also Holy Week in the Christian world, and I was just at the

Maundy Thursday service at my church last night. It was beautiful. We talked about the life and Judaism of Jesus, and the focus of the service was to remember the seder that Jesus and the disciples shared together on the night before he was crucified. So I'm delighted to be able to continue thinking on those things by being here with you tonight." She beamed, and everyone nodded or thanked her.

The next answer came from our friend Jack. He was sitting beside his wife of 40 years, Susie. "I've been coming to these things for decades," Jack said with a grin, "and I mostly come for the food." Everyone laughed. There is indeed a lot of good food at a seder table.

I was already uncomfortable by this point but wasn't sure why. In fact, I was trying to find a way to leave the room gracefully. Thankfully, Sima was fussing, so I stood up with her and walked into the kitchen. I was still visible to those around the table, but now there was a convenient wall between us. I missed the third answer.

I wandered to the doorway between the rooms for the fourth answer, this one from a Montessori teacher and activist who was raised Catholic. She said, "I have little connection with my childhood faith anymore, and that's fine with me. I am a spiritual seeker, and I always enjoy the seder. In fact, I probably enjoy it more than Robert here," she explained, gesturing to her spouse sitting beside her. He grinned, and everyone chuckled, knowing that, even though Robert is a Jew, he is also often hostile toward Judaism's rituals and practices. "She's right about that!" he concurred.

I began to inch back into the kitchen; I figured the group would just move on. Clearly, I had to care for the baby and was too preoccupied with that important task to answer the question. But Jason, who had posed it, wouldn't let it go.

"Jon, what about you? We haven't heard from you yet."

"To be honest, I was trying not to answer," I confessed. But then I changed my tone: "Frankly, the question kind of pisses me off. I mean, it is an honest question, but it bothers me that I have to be here at this seder table as something. Why is that?" Everyone turned to face me, probably surprised at the rising emotion in my voice.

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"Do I have to be here as a 'Christian'?" I went on. "I am married to this beautiful woman," I said, motioning toward Michal. "Together with her, we are raising our daughter as a Jew. We pray and together we follow the practices of Judaism. Yes, I am also a Catholic, but for good and for bad I have thrown in my lot with the Jewish people.

"But I'm not here wearing a sign. I'm not here tonight as a 'Christian.' There's no imprint on my chest. It is not an ontological condition. Can't I just be here as a *human being*?"

With that I took a deep breath and went to sit down. On the way to my chair, dear Susie grabbed my hand and whispered, "Yes."

Belief is far less important than practice.

Religious identity is not what it used to be. It certainly is not necessarily singular. In fact, I am finding more and more affinity today with people who feel simultaneously religiously committed and religiously amorphous. For those of us in such a situation, I suspect it is often because we were nurtured in a tradition where believing is king.

Traditional Protestantism teaches what the New Testament clearly says on a few occasions: salvation comes through faith, and faith equals belief.

The man who codified the Protestant mind-set, Martin Luther, said it was a verse in Romans 1 that caused a revolution in his thinking about religion: "The one who is righteous

will live by faith" (Rom. 1:17). And so belief became sovereign. The foundation of Protestantism became (1) knowing the basic principles of faith and (2) stating them as convictions, like a form of allegiance. That's all you need to be a follower of Christ, a "Christian."

But believing comes and goes, doesn't it? Believing is a state of mind. The traditional Protestant way had me thinking that believing, all by itself, was transformative. The thoughts in my head quite literally made me a different (ontological) being than others who failed to have those thoughts. Thoughts therefore "saved" me—just in my thinking them and saying them out loud. How frightened I was, then, when it felt impossible to constantly maintain the correct state of mind—let alone the most appropriately spoken words.

Thankfully, those days are gone, as they are for many people. We have come to understand that belief is transient—and also that belief is far less important than practice. If I want to understand someone's religious life, I don't ask them what they believe but what they do.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, a 20th-century philosopher famous for critiquing imprecise language and thought, often reflected on religious life and belief. The most important thing he ever said on the subject was probably this: "You can't argue with the form of a life." In other words, religious belief may be imprecise, and often unsupportable on purely rational grounds, but what religion most essentially does is mold or shape a person. What it does is not something to be argued with.

That's why I go to mass. That is, in fact, why I have done many unquantifiable religious things over the years, from praying with rosary beads to going to confession to helping home-

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less people. I have done these things not out of obligation, not because I know or can comprehend the effects, but simply because I feel I should, and I seek to be formed by my religious tradition. Even when I can't explain precisely why, I kneel as I enter and leave church.

As I see it, thinking is important in a religious life, but not belief. Belief is only one result of thought, and in my experience, belief can actually suspend thinking. Probing, struggling, even arguing with God and with the texts of our traditions is honoring to God in ways that I used to understand only belief to be. As Thomas Aquinas once said, "The more we probe for

God, the closer we come." Or as the poet William Butler Yeats wrote in one of his best poems: "God guard me from those thoughts men think / In the mind alone; / He that sings a lasting song / Thinks in a marrow-bone" ("A Prayer for Old Age").

For these reasons, I readily call myself a Catholic. I identify myself with a tradition, a liturgy and a group of people down through history. I am (mostly) proud to do that. I hesitate, however, to claim the label "Christian," because it always seems to come out sounding like I am this instead of that. Christian identity is not, as I said at that seder table, an ontological condition. (Of course, I know that there are millions of Christians who believe that it is.) I cannot believe anything in my brain, or say anything with my mouth, that makes me less or more of a person than you.

So if you were to ask me, "What do you believe?" my answer would likely be, "I don't always know." Or, "What I believe can change from one day to the next." Or, most likely, "I don't think it matters a lot what I believe, because my current state of mind does not define, or give much meaning, to my spiritual life or my religious convictions." Please instead ask me what I do. Ask me about the form of my life.

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by Samuel Wells

Ministry without God

I HAVE THREE KINDS of conversations with clergy. I get an invitation to speak somewhere and afterward find myself drinking coffee or something stronger with someone who wants to talk to a stranger. Or I've written or said something that intrigues or irritates someone, and he or she wants to talk. Or, because I live in London, someone I once worked with passes through and suggests we catch up.

But they're all the same conversation: "Is it well with your soul?" We don't hum rousing melodies with a key change for the last verse. Instead we explore: "Is this turning out to be the vocation you were called to? Can you be a pastor and still be a Christian? Are you certain about the things you used to be vague about and flakier about the things you used to be sure about?"

Leaving aside those who want advice on pursuing doctoral studies in mid-career and those who assume that because I live in Trafalgar Square I pause at 4 p.m. to have tea with the queen, I find that these three questions yield three kinds of answers.

The first kind, which I encountered recently in Scandinavia and in Germany, said, "I feel like a civil servant. People pay their church dues, and membership is artificially high, but church attendance is low, and there's this huge disconnect where faith is something that's in the culture but no one expects or even wants me to talk about it. It's like I'm in a marriage where the love has gone and no one has the courage to separate or the initiative to reignite the fire. We're going through the motions. I'm experiencing slow asphyxiation."

The second kind, which I met not long ago in Hong Kong, said, "All your talk about the practices and habits of ministry sounds very pious and sentimental. I spend my life competing in a marketplace where people want products—a stylish wedding, a good educational experience for their child, a highly effective social care provider to which the local authority may subcontract services, a good price for a building extension. That's what church means here."

The third kind, which I find so widespread in the Church of England that I'd call it the norm, goes like this: "I went into ministry because I aspired to the privilege of being with people at the deepest moments of encounter or loss in their lives; to cherish the ways we meet God, and to be close to people when they feel the absence of God; to be a still point, a sabbath, for people who are run ragged; to be a prophet of abundance in a world of scarcity, a person who is not afraid when a community or an individual is staring down into the bottom of the pond.

But the church is giving in to the culture of counting, target-setting, commodifying and circumscribing, and I have to fight to maintain the space truly to be a pastor."

I come away from these conversations humbled and full of admiration for my companions in ministry. But all three kinds of clergy, in different ways, seem to be facing the same pressure—or temptation: how to carry on in ministry, or make the church function, as if there were no God.

The first pastor is in the midst of a well-oiled but soulless machine that has accommodated church to state and society so comfortably that one seldom notices the crossovers. Like Immanuel Kant's notion of God as the moral law written on our hearts, the God of this machine has no particular personality or characteristics but simply facilitates a series of rites of passage and entitlements. It's hardly surprising that clergy in this system are living lives of quiet desperation: they might as well be running the train company.

The second pastor is so busy proving that the church can play with the big bucks in the big league, can mix it with contractors and commercial players, can hold its own in the market place of social forces, that the reason for the church's existence is submerged in the activity and profitability of its flourishing. It's like Pentecost without foregoing cross and resurrection. Christ hasn't saved us from anything or to anything—merely provided a dynamic and resonant brand name.

The third pastor is subject to a more subtle temptation—to withdraw into the apparent simplicity of the pastoral encounter and downplay the power and responsibility of shaping an institution, a community of disciples, a radical witness to a different hope, a new possibility, a cruciform truth. There's an introverted naïveté that risks substituting spirituality and inner healing for church and mission. For every minister who enjoys this third vocation, there are bound to be others balancing the books by striving to practice better versions of the first two models.

Every pastor has a family member who constantly says, silently or aloud, "You're wasting your time." Sometimes that voice is coming from the pastor. In the wilderness of unbelief or failure, we're all tempted the same way Satan tempted Christ: to smooth respectability, superficial success or secluded intimacy. It turns out that all are understandable, well-trodden, but ultimately futile attempts to do what every Christian wants to do: avoid the cross.

Samuel Wells is the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London.

IN Review

Faith as a romance

by Amy Frykholm

First-time novelist Carlene Bauer begins an imagined correspondence between two midcentury Catholic writers with a question about the Holy Spirit.

Bernard, a fiery and impulsive poet, writes in his opening letter to Frances, a more reserved and private fiction writer: “Who is the Holy Spirit to you?”

Frances demurs, “The Holy Spirit! Bernard, you waste no time. I believe he is grace and wisdom.” She does not return the question.

Bernard is unperturbed by her reticence. He takes another step toward her: “I don’t know what the Holy Spirit is or does. I think this is because I have come to Catholicism late and have felt hesitant to penetrate this mystery. . . . Is he grace and wisdom? How do you know?”

In creating the characters for *Frances and Bernard*, Bauer drew extensively on the letters of Flannery O’Connor and Robert Lowell, but the book does not precisely follow the trajectory of either of their lives. Instead, writing in an epistolary mode, Bauer illuminates interior dilemmas, asks theological questions, and explores the dimensions of a life of faith and of romantic love.

Frances’s religious faith is more deeply rooted than Bernard’s—both because she comes from a Catholic family and has nearly always had a religious sensibility and because of her temperament: she holds the world at a remove and ponders it at greater length. When she tells Bernard of her coming to faith, she pits the discovery of her own voice against her Catholic schoolteachers’ attempts to silence her. In other words, she holds her faith in a tension that is productive for her work. She never explains why she is a believer, and her

story of coming to faith isn’t convincing. If anything, faith functions for Frances as a deep, silent well, and she doesn’t much care for Bernard poking a stick into it. Bernard’s interpretation of her reticence: “She may always think harder than she loves.”

Bernard, on the other hand, believes that his faith is meant to save him. He has always understood his faith through his attraction to women, which has gotten him expelled from one religious community after another. But his lack of personal discipline leads him to believe that Catholicism might be his path to order and coherence. He can use it—along with the women in his life—to discipline his otherwise erratic art.

But Frances sees through him. When he sends her the proofs of his book of poems, she writes to her friend Claire, “Although Christ is all over these poems, hidden in historical figures, alluded to, quoted, and then expanded on as a way to reach Bernard’s impressive imagery, Christ is not really in these poems. He is too on the surface of them to be actually moving within them.”

Frances and Bernard discuss faith frankly, attempt going to church together, talk about prayer and doubt and theology in rich terms, but somehow the reader knows, without anything being said, that this book does not have a pietistic bone in its body. Faith is an interlocutor. It is perhaps a ground for the two writers to walk on together. But it does not make any human dilemma easier to solve.

As Bernard falls in love with Frances and gradually compels her to love him,

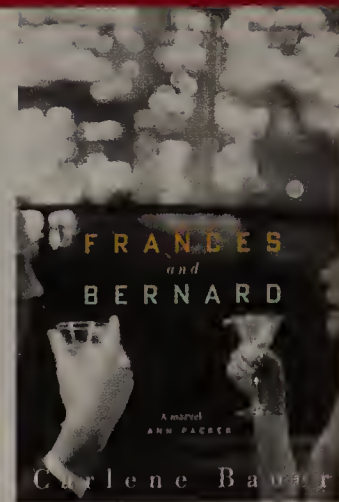
he also grows steadily more mentally ill. During his first manic episode, he comes into a church where Frances is praying. He announces loudly, “Today is the day of Frances Reardon, orphaned child of Brigid’s isle, patron saint of frigid knees. Of unmet wishes, of idées fixes, of withering eyes, of docile guise.” Soon after, he begins to throw prayer books at other parishioners.

Frances writes in the aftermath:

Maybe you should leave off the Augustine and turn again to Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky. Those two writers I think come closest to giving us the best modern articulation of what it means to struggle with what we have been charged with. They are poets of the agony that is doubt and of the burden that is conscience.

Despite the richness of its theological content—the challenges, doubts and agonies of faith—the book seeks secular solutions to religious struggles. Faith is more of an obstacle for both Bernard and Frances than it is a way forward. Romantic love and writerly ambition provide a greater sense of redemption than faith, which seems only to stir things up, create unanswerable dilemmas and cause the characters to live too much in their imaginations and not enough on the ground.

Both Bernard and Frances struggle with Simone Weil’s statement, “To accept that [people] are other than the creatures of our imagination is to imi-



Frances and Bernard

By Carlene Bauer

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 208 pp., \$23.00

tate the renunciation of God. I am also other than what I imagine myself to be. To know this is forgiveness." Frances and Bernard create each other as pieces of their imaginations. They also create God as pieces of their imaginations and struggle when their visions cannot meet their realities. They eventually, but perhaps not ultimately, take refuge in the more tangible presence of romantic partners and writing prizes. But the book is delightful for the questions it raises and for the perfectly rendered voices of its characters. We listen in on an intimate conversation that has implications far beyond its own boundaries.



QUESTIONS FOR CARLENE BAUER

Your book tackles sophisticated theological themes. What is your own religious background?

I was raised evangelical in south Jersey. My mother became, in the late 1970s, what we now know as "born again." My dad was Catholic. As a child, I thought Catholicism was something you did without thinking about it—an ethnicity rather than a faith. My dad was basically disinterested in religion, but he still wanted us to go to mass with him occasionally.

When I went to a Catholic college I saw that Catholicism was also a philosophy, a theology and a politics. I saw that you could be a Democrat and a Catholic by reading Dorothy Day. When I read Flannery O'Connor I saw that you could be an artist and a religious person. I started accruing more evidence that Catholicism was a whole way of life.

The big struggle for me as a young person was how to be someone who was interested in creativity and art and not losing one's faith to do it. Catholicism seemed to have better answers to that question.

Did you then convert to Catholicism formally?

I did. I was in my late twenties, and I had been in New York for a few years. I started going to St. Francis Xavier on 16th Street in the Village with a college friend. One Sunday, I heard a woman talk about how she had more of an intellectual faith than a lived faith, and I thought, "That's my problem too. Why don't I convert?" I converted because I thought I should do something to give direction to my life.

How did that work out?

About six months after I converted, a lot of the stories about sexual abuse in the archdiocese of Boston came out. I was aware of these stories in a new way. It was undeniable. I just can't show up at church and wonder about what is going on in the sacristy. I found that I couldn't pray. At first, I felt my loss of faith as a relief. Maybe a sadness. I think I feel the loss more now.

How did you get interested in writing about midcentury Catholic writers?

I read Paul Elie's *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, and I learned that O'Connor and Lowell had met at the writers' colony Yaddo. I had not known and hadn't imagined that they were friends. And I learned that Robert Lowell had been Catholic, which even in my mania for writers who converted, I hadn't known. Elie also suggested that O'Connor was a little infatuated with Lowell. Can you imagine Flannery O'Connor having a crush on Robert Lowell? That seemed like one of the juicier tidbits of literary gossip. I decided to imagine what it would be like for two people like that to fall in love.

I had also read the Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop letters, and I was fascinated by the interplay between a woman who was more loose and a man who was more adhesive.

Why did you choose an epistolary mode for this subject?

When you write a letter, it is necessarily immediate and personal. If I had been writing in a contemporary moment, I don't know that I could have used that form. But in a letter, you are allowed to mouth off, allowed to rant, allowed to be florid. It was a form in which I could create drama. In the space of a letter, two weeks can pass and everything changes. I was much freer. The form is so elastic.

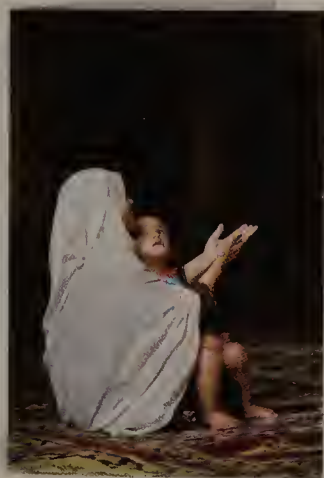
Why did you decide to make the book a theological meditation as much as a love story?

It helped that I could set it in another era. It seemed easier to imagine these two writers sitting around talking about Simone Weil in the mid-1950s than it did in our own moment. At the same time, my friends and I talk about religion all of the time. But can we make fiction out of it? That's another matter.

—Amy Frykholm

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The American Health Care Paradox: Why Spending More Is Getting Us Less

By Elizabeth H. Bradley and Lauren A. Taylor
PublicAffairs, 272 pp., \$26.99

This may be one of the three most important books your member of Congress will probably never read.

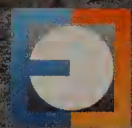
The first is journalist T. R. Reid's *The Healing of America: A Global Quest for Better, Cheaper, and Fairer Health Care* (2009). A couple of hours with this book and Republican legislators might finally discover that most other economically advanced nations have systems that cost less than America's, give better results and (shocker!) aren't socialist.

The second is David Goldhill's *Catastrophic Care: How American Health Care Killed My Father—and How We Can Fix It* (2013). Goldhill, who is both a CEO and a Democrat, offers a health-care proposal combining free-

market business principles, personal responsibility and concern for the common good. A couple of hours with this book and Democratic legislators might realize that although the U.S. health-care system desperately needs fixing, Obama-care may not be the solution.

The third book is neither as entertaining as Reid's nor as concrete as Goldhill's. But if the goal is to keep Americans as healthy as possible while spending no more than necessary, it may be the most important of the three, because it completely reframes the usual (and by now tedious) discussion. *The American Health Care Paradox* is a paradigm shifter.

Americans spend more on health care and get poorer results, say Elizabeth H. Bradley and Lauren A. Taylor, because we are coming at health care backward. Instead of investing in social services that help people stay healthy, America spends vast amounts trying to fix people after they have fallen ill. Until the U.S. reunites social and medical services as



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health-care partners, all the health-care legislation in the world will accomplish little.

The authors are well credentialed: Bradley is a professor of public health at Yale, and Taylor is a presidential scholar studying public health and medical ethics at Harvard Divinity School. Two years ago they attracted national attention with a *New York Times* article arguing that, contrary to popular opinion, America does not spend more than any other nation on health. If health care and social service expenditures—"like rent subsidies, employment-training programs, unemployment benefits, old-age pensions, family support and other services that can extend and improve life"—are looked at together, America's total outlay is in tenth place (it has since fallen to 13th). And although most other industrialized nations spend two dollars on social services for every dollar spent on health care, America spends just 90 cents (now only 60 cents).

Sadly, the American tendency to medicalize health care seems not to be working so well. Bradley and Taylor tally the results of the U.S. approach:

Americans have lower life expectancy and higher rates of infant mortality, low weight birth, injuries and homicides, adolescent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, drug-related deaths, obesity, diabetes, heart disease, chronic lung disease, and disability than people in other industrialized countries.

Bradley and Taylor's message, repeated in one form or another in every chapter, is that Americans need to start thinking seriously not just about how much money they are spending on health, but on how effectively they are spending it.

Readers hoping for a political way out of America's health-care impasse (or for ammunition to support their partisan preferences) will be disappointed in this book, which is much more about why than how. The authors say they grimaced when they saw the title on the

New York Times article presenting their position: "To Fix Health Care, Help the Poor." They are not politically motivated, they say; nor are they advocating social justice. What they want to do is prompt Americans to reconceptualize health in order to maximize "the return on investment of our national expenditures." Besides, they say, this isn't just about the poor: "Americans who are white, insured, college educated, and upper income have poorer health than do their counterparts in other industrialized countries."

Why has the United States chosen a costly system with less than stellar results? Bradley and Taylor offer an assortment of explanations for why Americans have put most of their eggs in the medical basket while ignoring the social services component of good health: a historical tradition of rugged individualism, a long-standing preference for voluntary rather than compulsory charity, a fear of government expansion, lobbying on the part of health-care providers who

fear loss of revenue and "a mistaking of health care for health."

Other countries have made different choices. The Scandinavian countries, for example, spend about twice as much of their gross domestic product on social services as the United States does, providing more government monies for "public education, health care, child allowances for families with children, pension rights, public housing support, and other social programs leading to improved welfare." At the same time, they spend only half as much per capita on medical care, yet their life expectancy is higher than America's, and their infant and maternal mortality rates are lower.

In a fascinating chapter, Bradley and Taylor explore attitudes that might help explain why countries that are similar in many respects have taken different paths. Scandinavians and Americans, their research showed, have similar attitudes toward personal freedom, science and technology, politics and competition. Scandinavians, however, focus more on

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Reviewed by LaVonne Neff, who blogs at *Lively Dust* and reviews books at the *Neff Review*.

the common good, while Americans are strongly individualistic. Scandinavians are less tolerant of income inequality. Perhaps most important, Scandinavians are more likely to trust one another—and their government.

Looking at other countries' approaches to health care is just one of the ways Bradley and Taylor hammer home their message that an effective health-care system requires social even more than

medical services. To show the importance of social services not only to the poor but also to seniors and to middle-class people with emergencies, they offer extended case histories. To demonstrate that social and medical services can learn to work together with good results, they describe an assortment of ongoing successful partnerships between hospitals and community care organizations, both public and private.

But the authors are not wildly optimistic that change is coming anytime soon. Various U.S. presidents, they note, have tried to increase America's level of social services. Some, like Lyndon Johnson, have succeeded, but then others, like Richard Nixon, have undone their work. The reason is chilling, at least to those who suspect that the love of money might be the root of all evil:

Occupying 17.9 percent of the GDP in 2012 and employing one in eight working Americans, the health care industry returns significant profit for any number of professional guilds, health care organizations, and publicly traded corporations. If embracing a holistic vision of health and developing shared accountability results in a shift of funds from health care to social services or a repurposing of health care funds to achieve population health outcomes, a substantial number of Americans may stand to lose. As a result, a number of stakeholders and their political lobbies are likely to fiercely oppose and actively resist a flattening or redirecting of resources consumed by the industry.

Still, Bradley and Taylor hang on to hope. "If taxpayers understood that health was largely determined by nonmedical factors," they say, "more strategic national investments that more efficiently align medical and nonmedical efforts to attain health might be possible." Their book may help to increase that understanding.

First, though, someone needs to persuade Congress to stop posturing and start reading.

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Does Jesus Really Love Me? A Gay Christian's Pilgrimage in Search of God in America

By Jeff Chu

HarperCollins, 368 pp., \$26.99

Religious book publishers have brought out scores of titles about homosexuality in recent years, but Jeff Chu's book is in a class of its own. A gay Christian with a compelling personal story, Chu also happens to be a superb journalist who listens closely to whoever is sitting across from him. "When I first came out, I couldn't find a book with stories across a theological and experiential spectrum," he says. So he spent a year traveling the country and talking with dozens of people with a wide range of perspectives. Along the way, his project became a spiritual pilgrimage.

Chu deserves the broadest possible audience, not just because of his subject but because he shows how to charitably

engage believers who hold very different views. This is a good strategy, of course, for it models the kind of understanding he wants in return. It also makes for lively reading. We sit on the edge of our seat as he meets with Richard Land, top lobbyist for the Southern Baptist Convention, "large, imposing, not a little loud, not a lot subtle, unapologetically political," who accuses homosexuals of causing the "full-blown paganization" of America. Another firebrand southern pastor tells Chu why homosexuality is "the biggest threat to our civilization!" (Apparently they had no idea he is gay.)

Likewise, Chu finds drama in a range of people coming to terms with their sexuality whose experiences differ from his. He visits with three gay men who have fallen from belief, and another who has left pastoral ministry to become a sous-chef. A middle-aged man in Minnesota tells him why he has chosen to remain celibate. A woman in Seattle claims to

Reviewed by Lawrence Wood, who lives in Michigan.

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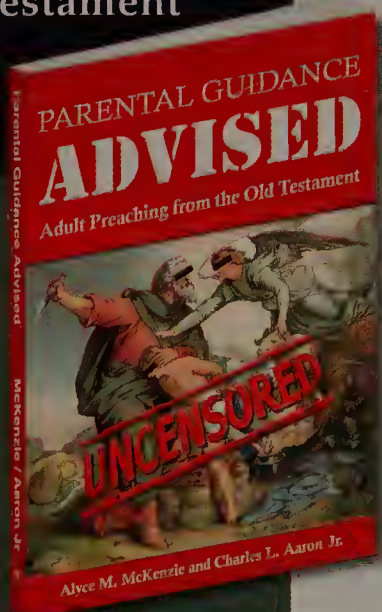
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have been "healed" of lesbian desires: "Some people will believe this, and some people won't," she says. "That's okay. This is my story."

Chu is willing to accept that many different experiences are at some level authentic. When a gay man and a straight woman awkwardly insist that they are determined to make their marriage work, Chu charitably notes:

It's difficult for me, as a gay man, to hear my sexuality described as a wound, as an imperfection. Yet I understand that this is how Jake sees it—how he *must* see it, given his worldview. . . . It's tempting to say, "Wow, he's repressed." And yet hear the long version, sit with them, listen to their struggle, understand the incredible work they've done to unpack and analyze and process and reevaluate, and things look different.

In the light of these conversations, Chu does some serious soul-searching

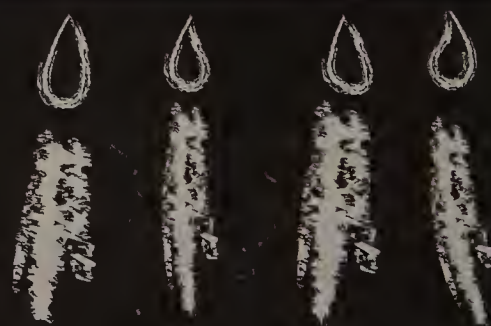
and reexamines his own hard-won beliefs, as indicated by the book's questioning title.

Chu's own story by itself would have made for a strong, though lesser, book. Raised in a strict Baptist household, the grandson of a pastor, he attended a Christian high school where the fate of an outed teacher let him know what lay in store if he revealed his own feelings. His parents still have not accepted his sexuality. Songs from childhood resonate with him—"Jesus Loves Me," of course—but it has been hard for him to find a church where he feels both accepted and fulfilled, for he is an evangelical at heart, restless amid liberal platitudes. Metropolitan Community Churches, he feels, are more preoccupied with sexual identity than with God. At Highlands Church in Denver, he finds a more diverse, God-centered family of faith. In the course of writing his book, Chu becomes a mentor to a young gay Christian whose own strength of spirit inspires him.

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All of this personal experience provides context for Chu's journalism. In largely evangelical Nashville, a pastor explains how his megachurch has decided to help a lesbian couple raise their child in the faith, and a young lesbian woman describes her journey to vital Christianity. A counselor in Memphis who formerly tried to help people "leave the gay lifestyle" now admits that "things I've taught have been wounding." The country's rapid movement toward new views is reflected in such fascinating profiles.

Chu grants most of his subjects a sympathetic hearing, but at times he is willing to give them plenty of rope, as he does with disgraced pastor Ted Haggard, still defensive and opaque, and Alan Chambers, longtime president of the ex-gay organization Exodus International, who vainly tries to explain what he means by the slogan "Change Is Possible." (Since publication of Chu's book, Chambers has apologized for his part in the promotion of discredited orientation-change therapies.)

Showing incredible pluck, Chu goes where few other gay men would dare to go—Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, which famously proclaims that "God Hates Fags." Baked by hellish 105-degree heat, he meets a six-year-old boy wearing a placard that bears those words. Chu's face-to-face meeting with the Reverend Fred Phelps seems like an encounter with pure evil:

Slouched in an office chair behind his desk, his skin sallow, Phelps looks all of his eighty-two years. His frosty eyes, peeking out from the brim of his white cowboy hat, are several shades paler than the blue of his Kansas Jayhawks jacket, which seems to protect him from his own chill.

There's an uncanny moment when Chu briefly wins Phelps over with a scrap of biblical quotation and mention that his grandfather was a Baptist preacher. "I think we might be able to have a little bit of friendship," Phelps says.

At times Chu's effort to understand such a hateful figure strains credulity. Noting Phelps's early fame for his work for racial justice and the honors he received from the NAACP, Chu briefly wonders if this might be a modern-day John Brown. He marvels at the ordinary good manners of Westboro members who offer him pizza and a soft drink. "Every member of the church we meet, except for Fred, is warm and welcoming. They're good, easy conversationalists," he writes. "And they can be charmingly self-deprecating." "What if they're right?" he muses. "Maybe they're right." If the book has a flaw, it is this plaster saintliness.

Twenty years ago, Mel White surprised many people when he left the employ of Pat Robertson and Billy Graham and came out. It may be a measure of the distance we've traveled that he is not even mentioned in Chu's book. Instead, we hear from Andrew Freeman, a gay pastor who has found welcome in the Episcopal Church but can't wait to move on to another



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er topic. "Sitting around and talking about whether God actually loves gay people is quite uninteresting," he says. "There are far more important things in our faith to dis-

cuss, and far more important work that our faith requires of us." The question mark in Chu's book title might well be traded for an exclamation point.

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Belknap/Harvard University Press,

240 pp., \$22.95

It is extremely limiting to think of Albert Camus as an existentialist philosopher of the absurd. While Camus was never trained as a philosopher, Zaretsky demonstrates that many other themes marked Camus's thought. Camus was a highly principled person, and a strong advocate for justice. He had enemies on the left and the right—on the left for his rejection of communism and on the right for his opposition to capital punishment. As a Frenchman living in Algeria, he was highly critical of France's subjection of the native peoples living there (Berbers and Arabs), and critical of terrorist actions by the rebels who fought for independence. On the torture of terrorists, he said: "In this way the police have given birth to terrorists who in turn have given birth to yet more police." Camus's voice still has resonance.

Without Apology: Sermons for Christ's Church

By Stanley Hauerwas

Seabury Books, 208 pp., \$18.00 paperback

Does it preach? That's the question sometimes asked of theology by people who believe it should be an ecclesial, rather than just an academic, discipline. Hauerwas, a layman, answers that question affirmatively in this collection of sermons, most of which were preached in Episcopal churches, including the one where he is a member. "I find preaching to be theologically the most fertile work that I do," Hauerwas says in the introduction. "As far as I'm concerned I can discern no difference in the work I do as an academic theologian and when I am writing a sermon." An appendix includes "An Open Letter to Christians Beginning College," an essay that should be given to every college-bound high school graduate.

ON Media

Pulled home

Alfonso Cuarón's movie *Gravity* is about a disastrous space shuttle mission. Medical doctor Ryan Stone (played by Sandra Bullock) and veteran astronaut Matt Kowalski (played by George Clooney) try to make their way back to Earth. Amid their struggle to survive, the two discuss the death of Stone's daughter in a schoolyard accident. *The CENTURY's* media columnists Kathryn Reklis, Jason Byassee and Beth Felker Jones discussed the film with editor Amy Frykholm.

Amy Frykholm: How important was the setting of space to this film? Could the same story have been set underwater or in a desert?

Kathryn Reklis: For me, the setting of space was far more important than the story. Earth was a recognizable mystery floating in a disorienting infinity. More than a backdrop, it was a presence that I experienced as alien and intimate. I could recognize landmarks, but I could not fully reckon it as my home.

Jason Byassee: Space is beautiful, but you understand why Kowalski is so in love with Earth. When you see the outlines of continents you think: that's us—our world! It is so achingly beautiful that even those with no prayers are compelled to pray.

And yet the universe is indifferent to the tenuous nature of our lives. Like Stone's daughter, we might slip on the asphalt, hit our head and die in an instant. We might never have emerged from the primordial slime. Or we might destroy ourselves.

Beth Felker Jones: I was moved by the insistence of the characters on talking continuously to those at home. So many of the messages in the film were forms of prayer—like the way they continue to report to ground control despite the fact



PRAYERS IN SPACE: Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity* evokes the fragility of life and the emptiness of space.

that the voices from Houston have gone silent. Though Stone and Kowalski don't know whether anyone can hear them, they don't stop communicating.

When Stone finally establishes a radio link with someone on the ground, there's a language barrier, but nonetheless she's comforted by her contact with another human being and with the mundane realities of life on earth. The dog barking in the background of the radio call with the Chinese man becomes incredibly significant. Dogs are the antithesis of outer space, a reminder that the world still exists.

JB: That scene will not leave my mind. In conversation even with those we can't understand or who can't hear us, we bark like dogs, cry like babies and beg to come home. How beautifully and desperately human.

AF: What do we make of the fact that there is essentially only one character in this story, and that the character is a woman? Is this Stone's story or is it Everyman's (or Everywoman's) story?

BFJ: I see it as an Everyman story. I wondered if Stone's gender-ambiguous first name, Ryan, is important in this sense. I was annoyed by it at first, but it was refreshing to see a female protagonist in a story that is not about romance or sex. While *Gravity* still doesn't pass the Bechdel test—according to which a story must have (1) two named women (2) who talk to each other (3) about something besides a man—Stone's story isn't defined by a man. I think a part of me wanted her story to be a woman's

story that wasn't about sex instead of a story about a universalized human being.

KR: Recently online sci-fi fan girls have come up with the Mako Mori test: a story must have (1) at least one female character (2) who gets her own narrative arc (3) that is not about supporting a man. It's a lower bar, but it helps to account for movies like *Gravity* that feature strong female leads in complicated stories.

BFJ: What about the way the director draws on birth and baptismal imagery? There is a long shot of Stone lying in the airlock in fetal position and then, after several trials, she emerges out of the water.

KR: I saw the imagery as evolutionary. When Stone first gets inside the space station, takes off her suit and coils her body, I immediately thought of the womb. So, too, her push through a small opening and through rushing water to emerge from the space capsule.

But when she was lying on the sand, pressed against that vibrant red earth and struggling to find her legs in the pull of gravity, I thought of evolution—the sheer impossibility of intelligent, communicating, suffering life rising out of the mud and water and walking away from the primal ooze on two legs.

BFJ: I thought of the primordial ooze, too, but the lack of specificity of the location bothered me. I suppose we couldn't expect her to land in Illinois, and I suppose it mattered that Kowalski coaxed her to remember her specific location on Earth. Still, the film failed for me when

the universal overshadowed or erased the particular.

KR: This aspect of the film reminded me of *The Road*, adapted by John Hillcoat from the novel by Cormac McCarthy. Space is a kind of postapocalyptic landscape, devoid of life and hostile to all the best and worst intentions of human activity. This parallel was driven home for me when Stone prays to the recently departed Kowalski. She has just confessed that she does not know how to pray, and yet she has resolved to keep going in the face of despair. Out of a deep, unreflective instinct, she prays to her dead comrade.

In *The Road*, after a man and his son discover a well-stocked bunker and sit down to eat their first satisfying meal in ages, the boy expresses a desire to give thanks. Knowing no other reality, he prays to the people who left the food, drawing them into a larger circle of the life that he and his father are struggling to live. There seems to be a profound parallel here: the possibility of continuing in the face of desolation has to do

with extending oneself into a deeper and wider community of human belonging.

JB: I see these universal themes, but Cuarón also loves the particular. You can see it in his visual love of Mexico in *Y Tu Mamá También* and in the reference to Lake Zurich, Illinois, as Stone's hometown. The particular here, however, is space.

KR: I would say not space but Earth is the particular. The film opens with a dire reminder that life in space is impossible. But Earth looms over every moment. Maybe Cuarón is pulling us back from the particulars of our lives to remind us that in the vast expanse of space, Earth itself and the human person are a mysterious miracle, a pulsating ball of particularity. And it is to this vision that Ryan is awakening—she wants in on the impossibility of being alive.

BFJ: The earth seems more like the particular than does space. There's a sense of unreality attached to the threatening setting of space. The fluid motion of the actors through space feels like

being underwater, cut off from the real world of light and air. Stone isn't back home until she climbs out of the water and caresses the earth. The gravity of Earth, with all its massive reality, inexorably pulls Ryan back home out of the terrible dreamscape of space. It's as though Earth itself won't permit her to cut herself loose. It's time to land, to be in place, feet on the ground.

JB: Cuarón seems to love the theme of transformation. He just never quite depicts it. I love the growth of Maribel Verdú's character in *Y Tu Mamá También*, but it's not quite believable. Nor is that of Theo Faron's character in *Children of Men*. Stone's transformation here is lacking something. I just don't believe the breakthrough that comes by praying to a recently dead, barely known colleague. Better to aim those prayers to the other images of prayer in the film: the icons of St. Christopher, the Buddha, even the floating Marvin the Martian.

BFJ: I agree that Stone's transformation isn't particularly convincing. While her conversation with her dead colleague packs a large emotional punch, it remains too vague, too generic. Talking with a recently dead colleague can only reflect the most vague and colorless notions of possible life after death. This is an afterlife totally disconnected from the specifics of who God is, why creation matters and how Jesus might relate to it. It is ephemeral and unsatisfying.

It's not that I would expect the film to adopt a robust Christian eschatology. But I might have been more convinced by a transformation attached to the icons or, far better, the voices of the real person, baby and dog that come from Earth.

KR: But perhaps Stone's prayer is the lynchpin for the whole vision of earthly particularity we've been discussing. Maybe these icons are not vague, religious gestures, but instead represent the same thing that Stone will come to discover: the fragility of life requires a leap of faith—not to God per se, but to the mystery of human existence as a radical impossibility, a luminous mystery in the darkness of space. She embraces the frailty, finitude and improbability of life as a gift in and of itself, regardless of the span or specific outcomes. This is what the setting in space highlights so profoundly.



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by Rodney Clapp

American SOUNDINGS

Christians without church

This spring my daughter and only child, Jesselyn, will turn 26. She and her husband live in the Chicago area, so my wife and I are blessed to be able to share meals with them, visit street fairs in their neighborhood and ask them to dog-sit for us. We take in movies together, go on walks and celebrate birthdays and holidays.

As a parent, it is a delight to say that Jesselyn has turned out to be a lovely and talented woman. She pursues editorial work. She cooks and bakes avidly and

Kindred of Jesus,” Jesus’ family asks for him. “A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother’” (Mark 3:31–35).

church. When Jesselyn was a toddler and we were awaiting worship, the priest passed by in his cassock. “There goes my Jesus,” she said fondly.

We worship at a congregation named St. Barnabas Episcopal Church. When Jesselyn was young we would often visit a local bookstore after Sunday services. Someone asked Jesselyn where she went to church. “St. Barnes and Noble,” she replied.

asked her if she would be comfortable if I joined the acolytes. She readily agreed, and I vastly enjoyed serving with her in that capacity. (At age 56, I’m still an acolyte.)

Like many people her age who were raised in the church, she and her husband are not regular churchgoers. They say they will attend church regularly once they have children. My wife and I have gently urged: Why not get in the habit now?

What difference does it make? After all, Jesselyn is a Christian in the deepest sense of the word (she is baptized and regularly prays) and also in the most superficial sense (if a pollster asked for her religion, she would identify herself as a Christian). The difference it makes, I think, is that being a Christian in the fullest accounting includes participation and growth in the corporate body of Christ. And she is missing out on the challenge and comfort that comes from the regular celebration of the Eucharist.

So we wait and hope for Jesselyn to return to vital participation in the church—and for new ecclesial memories to be made with my daughter, and my sister in Christ.

For Christians, family ties are second to baptismal ties.

expertly. She sews. She reads and listens to music and is a loyal devotee of National Public Radio. She is a lively conversationalist on books, movies, television shows, Japanese anime, and politics. In short, her company is to be treasured.

But I have not yet said the most important thing I can say about Jesselyn: she is baptized and was raised in the church. Though Jesus certainly prized his family, he was clear that the highest priority was allegiance to God and discipleship.

In a passage in my Bible with the subhead “The True

Paul likewise suggests that the most significant social role Christians inhabit is that conveyed by virtue of their baptism. Rendering secondary the most determinative social and ethnic roles of his day, he follows a statement on baptism with the declaration that in Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). I have taught Jesselyn, then, that she is not only my daughter but my sister in baptism.

We have many rich memories of experiences in the

Once we had friends over for a dinner party and someone mentioned the Eucharist. Jesselyn, then in late grade school, asked what that was. “What kind of Episcopalian are you,” I teased, “if you don’t know what the Eucharist is?”

She shot back, “What kind of theologian are you if your daughter doesn’t know what the Eucharist is?” (Later she admitted that she was fully aware of the Eucharist and its meaning.)

When Jesselyn was in high school, she sang in the church choir and was an acolyte. I

Rodney Clapp's Soundings column appears in every other issue.

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(from Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics)



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